LIGHTNING RETURNS: FINAL FANTASY XIII • POKÉMON X&Y • DEAD SPACE 3

gamesTM

www.gamestm.co.uk

PS3 | Xbox 360 | Wii U | PC | Wii | iPad | P ... rcade | Retro

THE NEXT-GEN COUNTDOWN

NEW XBOX VS PS4

PLUS

INSIDE THE TECHNOLOGY THAT WILL CHANGE GAMING FOREVER

HIGHLIGHTS

- BEYOND: TWO SOULS
- MONSTER HUNTER
- SIMCITY
- ALIENS: COLONIAL MARINES
- THE WALKING DEAD
- LUIGI'S MANSION 2
- ROME II
- DEAD ISLAND: RIPTIDE



DigitalEdition
GreatDigitalMags.com
ISSUE 132

REVIEWED
METAL GEAR RISING REVENGEANCE
Cutting down to the bone on Platinum Games' epic

The face of videogaming is changing. Inside this issue of **games™** we have started our Next-Gen Countdown, gathering together all the information available on the new Xbox and PlayStation 4. While these new console incarnations from Microsoft and Sony are undoubtedly exciting, and will take mainstream console gaming to a whole new level, it's what else is happening that has us *really* excited.

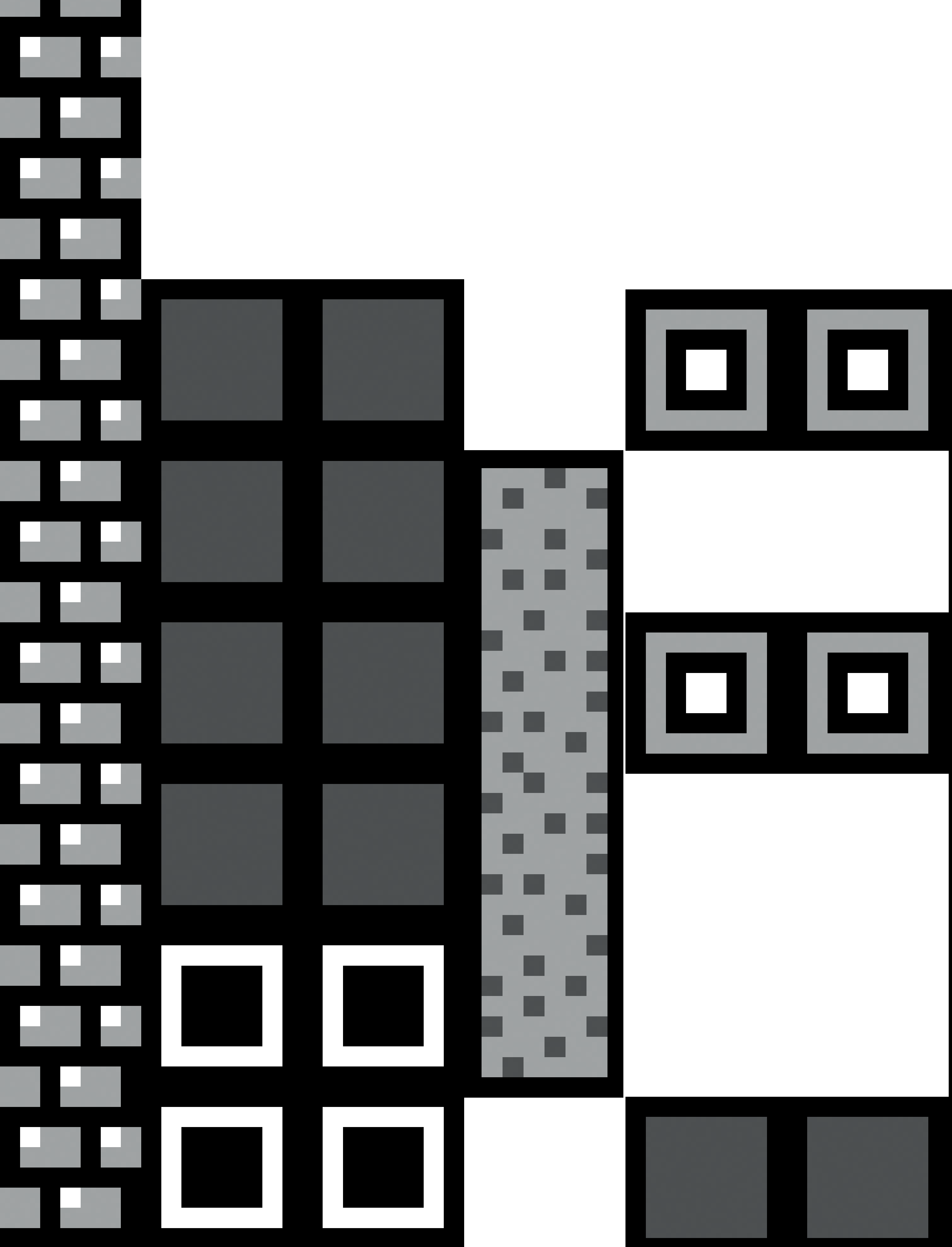
Could we see the return of the back bedroom programmer? The early days of game development were driven by nothing more than someone with a home computer and a great idea. The rise of Android as a gaming operating system on machines like Ouya will open up game development once again – releasing programmers from dev-kits, licensing and the need for teams of 200 – a return to the great game idea being king.

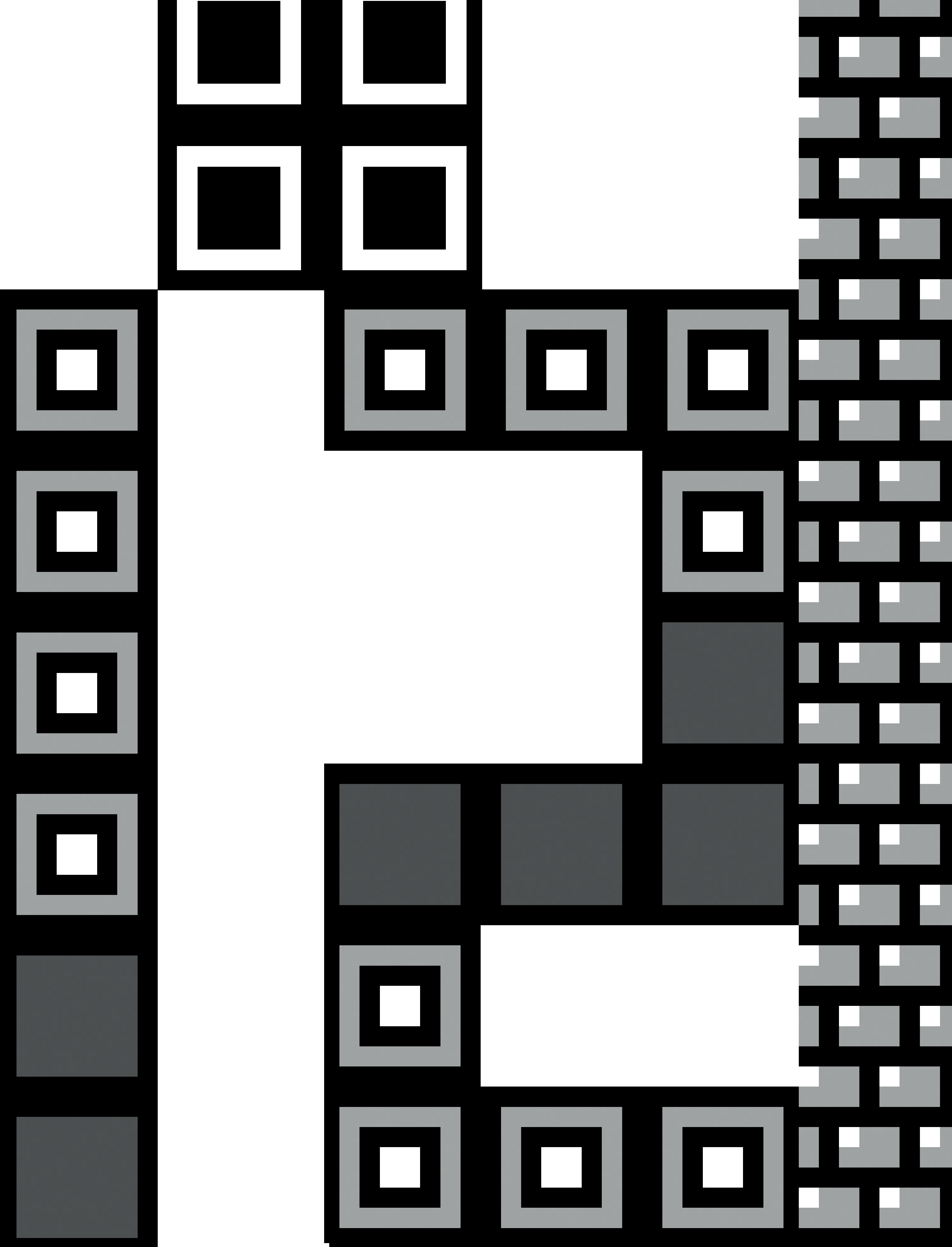
Add in Kickstarter as a way of crowdfunding the best game ideas, the development of the Steam platform to deliver more content direct to gamers and the potential for Nvidia to challenge Microsoft and Sony's dominance with Project Shield, and you have a very different games industry to the one that existed for the launch of Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. Exciting times!

Nick Roberts

Nick Roberts
EDITOR IN CHIEF







Contents



www.gamestm.co.uk 132 | 13

facebook.com/gamesTM @gamesTMmag gplus.to/gamesTMmagazine



28 Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon

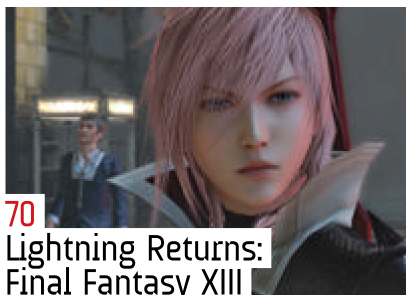
DISCUSS



22 SimCity

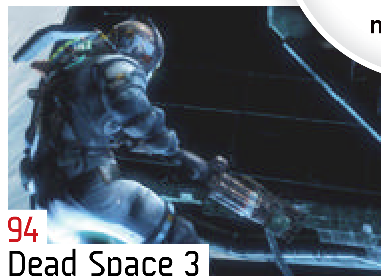
RETRO

PREVIEWS



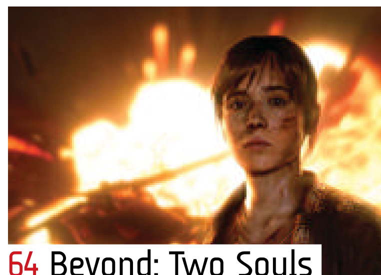
70 Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII

REVIEWS



94 Dead Space 3

FEATURES



64 Beyond: Two Souls

FAVOURITES

> Have your say on anything videogame related at **www.gamestm.co.uk/forum** and you could feature in **games™**



90 Review
Metal Gear Rising Revengeance
Platinum Games takes a stab at the Metal Gear franchise with Rising Revengeance, but does it hit the mark?
SUBSCRIBE NOW
and save 30%
Turn to page 86

Discuss

(BYE-BUY)

Will Sony bring an end to second-hand games?

→ As a new Sony patent outlines plans to prevent second-hand games potentially running on the PlayStation 4, **games™** investigates the effect it will have on consumers

The discovery of another curious videogames patent doesn't usually invite a huge amount of attention – considering that the majority of documents unearthed contain bizarre peripherals and unmarketable devices destined to remain at prototype stage – but a recent patent filed by Sony has caused something of a stir, once again highlighting perhaps that most contentious issue in the industry today: second-hand game sales.

Revealed in the document, Sony's PlayStation division has been developing technology that has the potential to block the use of second-hand games running on a future Sony console. The concept heavily utilises NFC (near field communication) – the type used in modern bankcards – which can associate a disc with a user's account, thereby preventing the software from running on other machines. "When the game is to be played, the reproduction device conveys the disc ID and a player ID to the use permission tag," the patent document details. "The use permission tag stores the terms of use of the game and determines whether a combination of the disc ID and the player ID conveyed from the reproduction device fulfils the terms of use or not."

While there's no confirmation on whether Sony will actually implement restrictions that can, as the patent states, "suppress" second-hand game sales, the release of the document has already caused hurt among the retail sector. American retailer GameStop suffered a 6 per cent drop in share price immediately following the news – stressing (as if it wasn't widely known) just how vital the sales of used games are to the current bricks-and-mortar retail space and the damaging repercussions such an ominous proposal could create. It could even represent the final nail in the coffin for troubled UK retailer GAME, which could not be reached for comment.



Above Sony Computer Entertainment America boss Jack Tretton has stated in the past that he has no intention of limiting consumer choice, including the purchasing of second-hand games. However, he admits that his decision could be overridden by Sony Japan.

> "A unilateral decision by Sony to limit the ability to play used games is unfriendly to consumers"
> Michael Pachter, Wedbush Securities analyst

BUT DESPITE INITIAL concerns that Sony's actions represent an attempt to stamp out the sale of used games indefinitely, other applications for the technology might be less cause for concern. One logical implementation would be as an alternative to the much-derided Online Pass, while others have suggested that Sony might just be bolstering security in the face of piracy and continued malicious hacking.

But such pragmatic pondering hasn't prevented industry analysts from weighing in on the subject, with Wedbush's Michael Pachter suggesting that Sony's move could spell trouble for the company's fortunes, comparing the patent to the anti-piracy bill SOPA. "If Sony puts the technology into the next PlayStation and any publishers attempt to limit the playing of used games, I expect



TIMESPLITTERS 4 MIGHT WELL BE DEAD BUT CRYTEK HAS SANCTIONED A TIMESPLITTERS CRYENGINE MOD

Contents

Your guide to the essential stories

For daily news updates and exclusive interviews

facebook.com/gamesTM

@gamesTMmag

gplus.to/gamesTMmagazine

the consumer backlash to be similar," he says. "Sony would be materially hurt if its console blocked used games and competitor consoles from Microsoft and Nintendo did not."

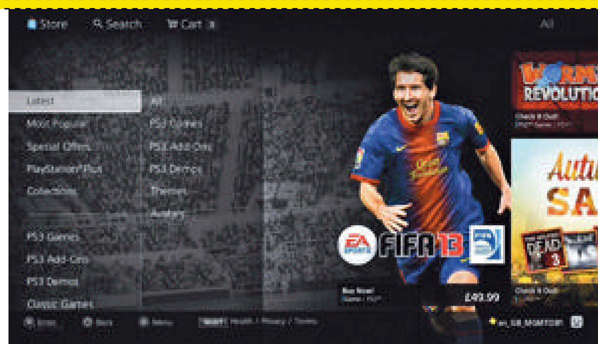
This is perhaps the most sobering point among the fiery backlash that has emerged since the news broke back in January. While publishers continue to minimise the impact of second-hand sales by installing preventative measures (such as the aforementioned Online Pass), any console manufacturer looking to inhibit second-hand games software functionality would suffer a disadvantage to its more open competitors.

INDEED, PACHTER CASTS doubt on whether Sony would make such a bold move at this stage. "I don't think that this will end up happening," he told **games™**. "[I] think that Sony is too smart to follow through."

There's also another possibility to consider. As the industry continues to flirt coyly with digital distribution, it has been suggested that Sony's own PlayStation Store could offer second-hand trading between users. It's not such a far-fetched notion, given that recent US laws have cleared the muddied waters of digital ownership (unsurprisingly, you own the product you download and have the right to do what you want with it) and some platforms already offer such a service.

But we're a long way from that future yet and it doesn't look like Sony will risk the PlayStation 4 alienating gamers. "Sony is on record as saying that it has no desire to limit consumer choice," analyst Michael Pachter states in his report on the patent. "While this statement was made by a senior official of the company who might be overruled by his superiors, we believe that a unilateral decision by Sony to limit the ability to play used games is unfriendly to consumers."

Perhaps it's best not to look at the patent as a means to finally crush the second-hand market into non-existence, but a step towards a way in which both developers and consumers can equally reap the benefits of used games sales. The digital platform is evolving as we know it and it's only a matter of time before the industry switches to an all-digital future – albeit, perhaps not with the next iteration of console hardware. Could we see Sony's PlayStation 4 promoting second-hand sales through its own store? Unlikely. But it's important to remember that while it's easy to believe that publishers consider second-hand buyers as murderers – killing the industry, as it were – first-hand videogame sales continue to thrive. The games industry was worth $31.6bn in 2006, $41.7bn in 2007, $54bn in 2008, $60.4bn in 2009, $62.7bn in 2010, $65bn in 2011, $67bn in 2012 and is predicted to reach $82 billion by the end of 2017. If rumours are to be believed then Sony will be announcing its next console in the coming months, and it's unlikely that any investment in preventative technology focused on the second-hand games market will be created to jeopardise Sony's stake in the marketplace.

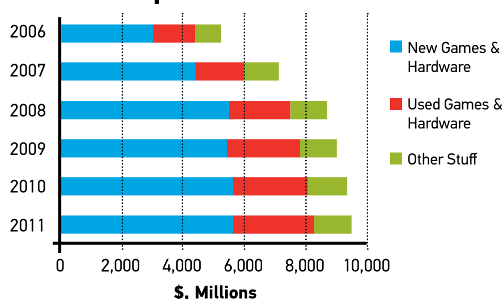


Above There has already been quite a vocal backlash from angry gamers on online forums. It's an issue that continues to widen the gap between corporate and consumer interests.

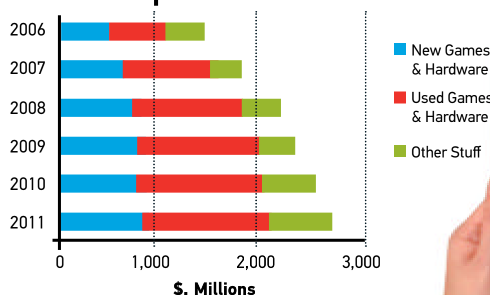
SECOND LIFE

→ A break down of US retailer GameStop's financials reveals how important second hand sales are for high street stores.

GameStop Sales

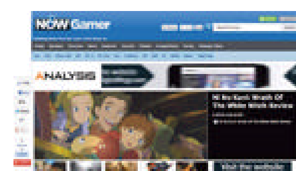


GameStop Profits



→ FURTHER READING

NowGamer.com



March might as well be called Christmas 2: Christmas Harder for all the gaming goodness unleashed at the beginning of the year and **NowGamer.com** has you covered for all the reviews, interviews and guides to get you through winter's last icy days. Elsewhere you'll find the latest news, rumours and tittle-tattle on Microsoft and Sony's new consoles and everything you need to know about Rockstar's imminent *GTA V*.

All About Space



In issue 9 of **All About Space** you'll find out about alien hunters, the most important people in the search for extraterrestrial life. Elsewhere in the magazine there's an in-depth feature on Neptune, a history of the ten greatest space discoveries, a futuristic article on faster-than-light travel, and much more – including buying tips and observing tricks for astronomy.

GreatDigitalMags.com

games™ is now available to read on any digital format thanks to our digital editions super-site, **greatdigitalmags.com**. The site allows you to enjoy your favourite mag on Mac, PC, iPad, Android devices and a whole host of other formats. There are some great subscription incentives too, only at **greatdigitalmags.com**.



→ GUILLERMO DEL TORO'S 'INSANE' MIGHT BE RESURRECTED AS HE HAS NOW LANDED A NEW DEVELOPER



(A DROP OF SOURCE)

The people that mod Half-Life

Modding has been a rich and vital part of PC gaming for years, but how has the Source engine become so important to the silent creators behind such inventive projects? **games™** investigates these passionate people and their Half-Life mods

In an age where day-one DLC, pre-order bonuses and microtransactions herald almost every new game, it's easy to overlook the money-grabbing that is ruining our pastime. Yet, on the other hand, numerous groups of devoted modders are currently chipping away at their virtual sandboxes, never hoping to earn a penny from their drive and determination. Modders diligently craft experiences no publisher would dare to attempt and – often – at the heart of all of this is Valve's Source engine, piecing together the necessary functions to ensure this hard-working (and often overlooked) community is catered for. But why?

When so many of us struggle to collect the energy to even finish a day at work, how can these modders stay so devoted? "Why does a singer sing?" poses *Jurassic Life*'s programming director Nicolas Kirsch. "The modding is a passion as any other passion for something we love to do. Maybe it may seem strange to some people, but it should not be. We are creating a mod project as some musicians create a musical album, so the goal is the completion of the project and the development stages themselves."

> "What we have invested is so huge that stopping is an idea that is unacceptable"
>
> Nicolas Kirsch, Jurassic Life

Though *Jurassic Life* has been in development for years now, it recently gained popularity when the latest video spread across the internet quicker than a raptor outbreak. *Jurassic Life* is a first-person shooter set inside the *Jurassic Park* universe, and that's something we've all wanted to play for some time. Yet it's modders we turn to for the opportunity, not LucasArts. But these modders are as keen to play such an experience as we are, and it is this passion that drives them to see the project to its completion. "The love for the *Jurassic Park* world with its wonderful dinosaur creatures," claims Robert Olender – art director on the project – as the key reason he is working on the mod, "and the wish to experience the adventure we are making and seeing the dinosaurs up close."

There's a wider reason beyond the desire to see something a publisher can't – or won't – look into creating. "Concerning the driving forces," Olender tells us, "I will have to say that expressing our creativity at least to some degree is important for us humans I think, or we die within. Interconnected with the expression of ideas you often find learning processes." Perhaps it seems like an alien concept for so many of us, but ask yourself this: given the opportunity, would you have a game you would want to make? Do you have an idea you'd love to see happen? Maybe it's not even gaming, maybe *your* creative outlet focuses elsewhere. Olender argues that this is true for everyone – regardless of personal interests – and modders just manage to tap into their creative juices and focus them on something specific.



Above With the level of quality that is going into *Jurassic Life*, it's no surprise it's taken this long.



Below *Jurassic Life* has gone through a variety of iterations, mostly to do with improvements to the engine itself.

EVEN WHEN THAT seemingly inexhaustible well of enthusiasm does run dry, these modders still have the determination to soldier on, to see their project finally come to fruition. "Sure this happens," says Kirsch, "but the time and work we invested is so huge that stopping is an idea that is unacceptable. We also could tone down the *Jurassic Park* aspect and create a new dino-game in a single-player campaign with commercial ambitions, but we don't want that. We don't expect to monetize the *JL* project."

David Meade, PR and developer dogsbody for survival-horror Source mod *No More Room In Hell*, admits that not everyone has that endless drive, and many developers will leave a project either to work on something new or quit entirely. "Not every team is right for everyone and through the years we've seen plenty of developers come and go. It's strange to think that you could have almost none of the original developers, but the game still manages to push through and succeed. It takes a little bit of luck



RUMOURS SUGGEST THAT PUBLISHER THQ WILL SELL OFF WARHAMMER 40,000 MMO DARK MILLENNIUM ONLINE



and a lot of self-motivation to keep yourself interested in a single project for so long."

David Wreden, sole developer on quirky first-person storyteller *The Stanley Parable*, agrees. There is no solution to finding the fountain of fortitude, he says, and it requires all the willpower you can muster: "There's no good answer to this, the art is in knowing the difference between a genuine desire to create and using creation to escape something else. The key is developing a relationship with yourself and your creative habits to where you understand this impulse. From there, there's no easy answer because sticking with something is not easy. There's probably going to be all sorts of times you want to toss everything out and do something else." Wreden echoes the sentiments of his fellow modders, adding "your ability to persevere anyway will reflect in the quality of your games."



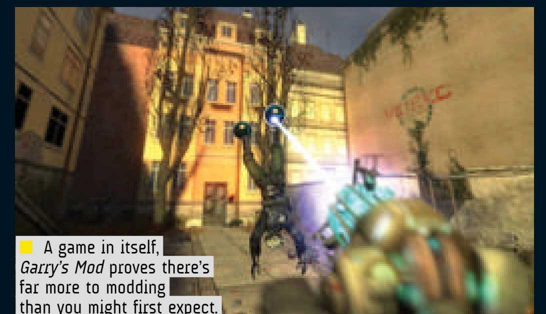
YET EVEN THE option of selling it – a financial carrot that could be dangled before disheartened modders – isn't really an option thanks to legal barriers and myriad other obstacles. "Since most mods aren't developed by a company," states *No More Room In Hell*'s Meade, "just some people who come and go as they please, there are no contracts." This is true of every project, and if the correct legal procedure isn't organised from the start, retroactively implementing such a system could ignore previous developers whose contributions – and claims to any profits – are just as valid as any other. Say nothing of *Jurassic Life*, which would first need the (unlikely) permission from Universal to even entertain the idea of selling the game. Meade adds that there's much more post-development, too, that many don't realise: "On top of that is the licence to sell an engine you're modding. If you are a mod on Steam Greenlight, Valve explicitly states that you need to have an engine licence. This is nice for Source mods since Valve has its roots in modding and the 2007 Source engine is fairly old and unused internally. Other engines may be a little bit harder to acquire a non-profit licence for."

WHY SOURCE THEN? While Unity has risen to popularity for mobile developers, Unreal remains the go-to retail game developer's option and even CryEngine is starting to get in on the action, what makes Valve's Source engine so popular for modders? It's free, for one. As Meade

MOD A MOD

→ How Garry Newman became a thing

WE DON'T THINK Garry Newman really expected his self-titled mod to really become quite as popular as it is, but by unlocking the Source engine – and the objects of any Source engine game installed on your hard drive – *Garry's Mod* became a huge success. Actually a game in its own right, the simple idea of turning Valve's physics-based engine into a sandbox to create, alter and play with your own creations seems so simple. It utilises the very aspect that makes the Source engine so appealing in the first place and turns it into a game, building a community devoted to experimentation.



A game in itself, *Garry's Mod* proves there's far more to modding than you might first expect.

EXTRA CREDIT

> KICKSTARTER



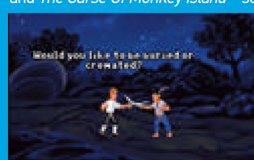
WILDMAN CAMPAIGN LAUNCHED

Dungeon Siege designer Chris Taylor launched a Kickstarter campaign for *Wildman* – an ambitious combination of RPG, RTS, hack-and-slash and MOBA. That's not the story here though. A few days after launching the campaign, Taylor laid off the majority of his workforce at Gas Powered Games, to avoid a messy situation with layoffs should the campaign fail to reach its target. A rare and surprising admission of honesty, then, and one that shows how precarious Kickstarter campaigns can be.

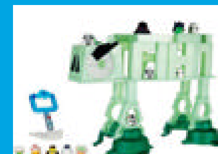
> BROWSER GAME

MONKEY ISLAND'S INSULT SWORD-FIGHTING

One of the most iconic moments from *The Secret Of Monkey Island* has been coded to work in web browsers thanks to the painstaking work of a fan named Karza. It features all the insults from both the original *The Secret Of Monkey Island* and *The Curse Of Monkey Island* – so if you're a scurvy lubber looking to brush up on your fighting talk, then head over to the link and partake in a little bit of pirate parlance: **www.int33h.com/test/mi/**



> TOY



ANGRY BIRDS STAR WARS AT-AT ATTACK BATTLE GAME

We've all accepted that we've had our collective childhoods viciously assaulted by the ongoing toy parade that is the *Star Wars* licence, so we may as well sit back and embrace it. *Angry Birds Star Wars* was a decent marriage of brands, yet it still pains us to admit that this spin-off toy has a certain destructive appeal. We want to own it. You do too. Now go back to your lives and feel thoroughly ashamed of yourselves.

→ CRYSIS 2 WAS THE MOST PIRATED VIDEOGAME OF 2011 ACCORDING TO A STUDY BY WEBSITE TORRENTFREAK.COM →

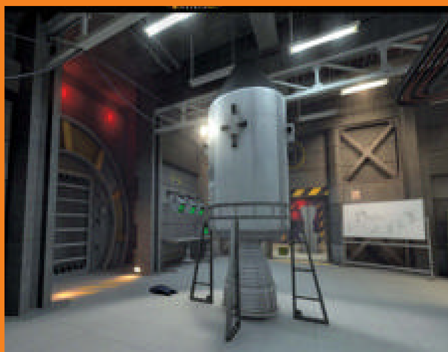
THE BEST OF SOURCE MODS

→ The most innovative, enjoyable and downright looniest creations you'll find across the Source modding community



Black Mesa Source

WIDELY CONSIDERED as *the* Source mod, *Black Mesa* surprised everyone last year when it *actually* released – albeit not entirely finished with the Planet Xen portion coming at a later date. More than just an HD remake of the original *Half-Life*, however, this is as much a whole new game of its own as it is a nod to the Valve classic. It's free to download – though you'll need to grab the Steam SDK from the *Black Mesa* site first – so you have no real excuses not to get involved. It's set to get a wider release through Steam Greenlight later in the year.



GoldenEye Source

WE ALL remember those days crowded around a single console with four-player split-screen. If nostalgia is your favourite flavour then this mod, which looks to recreate those multiplayer antics in a more modern Source engine-powered equivalent, will be all you ever need. Fans will love the inclusion of multiple different modes, as well as the slaps-only matches made possible by a freakily animated James Bond hand. Now just remember everyone: no shooting without a gun and never, *never* play as either Oddjob or Jaws.



Flipside

While the other mods mentioned in this article all have some unique aspect to them, *Flipside* proves the real limitless possibilities of a creative modder's mind. No one would have expected someone to craft a 2D platformer out of the Source engine, but that's *Flipside*. The clever system of duality impresses the most, however, which enables the player to be immune to damage on one side of the screen but unable to deal it unless they're on the other side.



Dear Esther

As one of the few Source mods to get made as a paid-for game, *Dear Esther* bucked the trend in more ways than one when it launched last year. With a unique approach to first-person gameplay – which saw the protagonist exploring a dreamlike environment with subtle clues piecing the story together – *Dear Esther* proved that you don't need to use Source just to shoot things. It's great to see mods receive widespread recognition too, hopefully paving the way for similar examples in the future.

mentions, you'll still need a licence for any engine you decide to mod, and Valve's history with modders means it is generally open to the community. The reason behind using Source differs between developers, however. Meade agrees that each engine has its own pros and cons, but claims "Source has one of the biggest communities which still remains the same to this day."

Even between team members the opinions can differ. *Jurassic Life*'s Olender suggests that back in 2005 – when the project first began – there was much less in the way of options. "Source engine or CryEngine 1 was what we felt we had to choose from at the time in 2005." Discussions among the team eventually lead to Source, "despite its not so favourable jungle features." Yet as programming director, Kirsch felt his needs from an engine – at least on a technical standpoint – was much more suited to Source over the visuals of CryEngine. "The strong interest I have for the AI system of the Valve games," he says, "is about the manner of how the artificial intelligence is implemented in the source code and applied to any creatures or actors in a game." Freeing Kirsch up to worry less about the general actions of an NPC, Source then gives him more freedom to create scripted scenes and events. "Source engine provides a very nice AI and programming is not too hard decrypt," he adds, conceding, "everything is relative".

But Source could well have reached its peak as more and more impressive tech becomes increasingly more accessible. It's been a few years since the latest version of Source was released, and even that was a little archaic by modern standards. *No More Room In Hell*'s Meade admits that if the decision was made now, Source would be a low contender: "If we were to start over today I don't think we would create *NMRIH* in the Source engine with the tools publicly available unless we somehow managed to get a more updated version such as Source 2009."

Olender continues his doubts on sticking with Source for *Jurassic Life*, too: "I've spent a week on CryEngine 3 and made a custom island



JUNCTION POINT, THE STUDIO BEHIND EPIC MICKEY 2: THE POWER OF TWO, HAS BEEN CLOSED BY DISNEY



Above Despite not being ideal for jungle settings, the Source engine was chosen for *Jurassic Life* due to its AI features.

very easily and planted hundreds of thousands perfectly placed trees and plants in 20 seconds. Lightning was stunning by default. That was so impressive it was ridiculous." Bad news for the Source engine, then.

But Valve is looking outside of the engine market these days, instead giving modders a new home to settle. The likes of Steam Workshop and Steam Greenlight help to emphasise the work of modders, building outside of Source as the sole way for Valve to embrace the community. "It makes modding a lot more accessible," says Meade. "Valve put a lot of effort into the Workshop and it's a great resource for individuals to showcase their individual work without the need for a huge team or a total conversion mod." Everyone else, however, such as those behind *No More Room In Hell* or *Jurassic Life*, still feels a little left out: "Now where do big total conversion mods fit into the Steam Workshop? That's the thing: they don't. Steam Greenlight is your best hope at becoming available on Steam and even that wasn't originally intended for mods."

Perhaps so, but then this is early days for the platforms. Greenlight itself is only a matter of months old and still has a lot of evolution ahead of it. While it might take some big changes for Source to stay on top of the modders' number-one engine list, there's no denying that Valve's interests seem to lie elsewhere. *Half-Life 3* will likely bring with it a brand new engine, and it's then that we'll see the real benefit to cultivating a modding community around Greenlight and Workshop. Just you wait and see.





Above David Wreden's work on *The Stanley Parable* should be commended for finding clever ways to implement storytelling.

Above *The Stanley Parable*'s story may heavily resemble the movie *Stranger Than Fiction*, but the option of interactivity – and replayability – emboldens it.

> "There's probably going to be all sorts of times you want to toss everything out and do something else"
>
> David Wreden, The Stanley Parable

(TOUCH ME)

Gaming on the go

→Everyone owns a smartphone now – but are you getting the most out of it? With the wealth of enticing experiences flooding both the App Store and Google Play on a daily basis, games™ presents some of the best iOS and Android games of the last few months

As Microsoft and Sony's release schedules look conspicuously lacking over the next few months, iOS and Android keeps on providing a glut of finger-flicking inventiveness that simply can't be found outside of mobile gaming platforms. While the likes of *Angry Birds Star Wars* and *The Simpsons: Tapped Out* remain mainstays of the download charts, many of the best games are hidden away beyond the storefront's narrow field of view. iOS and Android gaming isn't even restricted to mere time-wasters and visually quirky distractions any more, with *Infinity Blade II* and *Ravensword: Shadowlands* both presenting crisp fantasy vistas and epic gameplay on a scale not far surpassed by their console counterparts. Like it or not, mobile gaming, in all its inexpensive and inventive glory, is here to stay. So sit up and pay attention, as **games™** presents some of the best mobile games of recent months.

THE SNOWMAN AND THE SNOWDOG

Developer: **Crash Lab** Price: **Free**



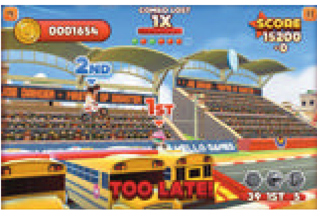
"AS A new company it's great (and rare) to get the opportunity to work on something that you know a lot of people will be aware of when it is released," says Crash Lab's Steve Ellis. "Everyone has heard of *The Snowman*. It's been shown on Channel 4 every Christmas for 30 years, so the new film was guaranteed to get a lot of attention." Likewise, Crash Lab's accompanying app struck a chord with children big and small, rocketing to the top of the download charts immediately upon release. Ellis, a veteran of Rare and Free Radical Design, cites the project as one of the most gratifying of his career. "Unlike many projects that I've worked on, we had a very clear vision right from the start of how the game would look and play," he says. "Despite the short timescale, we knew we were going to be able to create something special. We were a new company so we didn't have any existing tech or tools to use, but we didn't want to make the trade-offs that would be required if we went with a third-party solution like Unity. We had four months, a very small team and we decided to develop it all from scratch."

The result is an imaginative adaptation of the film's most iconic scene: the snowman whisking the young boy through the skies above England to the North Pole. The gameplay is simplistic in design, but thoroughly engrossing and the art direction captures the hand-drawn feel of the production. "I think our greatest achievement is to have actually managed to do it," Ellis adds. "Aside from that, though, one minor victory that I'm personally proud of was when I found the cheapest Android tablet that money can buy, coming in at £46. I didn't expect to be able to get the game running on it, so it was amazing when I did."

WHAT MAKES A GREAT APP?

"Two things that stand out to me are polish and accessibility. A relatively small amount of effort spent polishing at the end can turn a good game into a great game. Accessibility is more important than ever too. You can't make the same assumptions about the abilities of your players. You need to design an experience for players of all abilities."
Steve Ellis, Crash Lab

DATA STREAM → ATARI US OPS FILE FOR BANKRUPTCY IN A BID TO ESCAPE FRENCH PARENT FIRM



JOE DANGER TOUCH

Developer: **Hello Games** Price: **£1.99**



HELLO GAMES' stuntman makes the jump to the platform that, in some ways, he's always been perfectly suited for. The arcade controls just feel *right* in the palm of your hand and the vibrant presentation matches the best the App Store has to offer. As a bite-size slice of Joe action, it lacks the breadth of its console counterpart, but the diminutive daredevil brings with him the depth of challenge that long-time fans have come to appreciate.



BADLAND

Developer: **Frogmind** Price: **TBC**



SET TO appear in the App Store in March, the eagerly anticipated *Badland* is the creation of Johannes Vuorinen and Juhana Myliys – both ex-RedLynx staff who worked on *Trials Evolution*. A side-scrolling action adventure, *Badland* shares a similar vibe to *Limbo* with its shadowy visuals and physics-based platforming, but don't expect anything overtly morbid; what we've seen of *Badland* so far has indicated a far more whimsical story, inspired equally by *Rayman Origins*. It's hard to think of another upcoming iOS title that equals *Badland* for sheer inventiveness and atmosphere.

HUNDREDS

Developer: **Semi Secret Software**
Price: **£2.99**

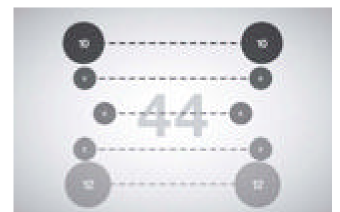


HUNDREDS – THE latest mind-stretching app from *Canabalt* developer Adam Saltsman – combines numbers and shapes for intense reaction-testing gameplay, but the app originates from a 2011 open source Flash prototype designed by Greg Wohlwend. "I dreamt the prototype of *Hundreds* up out of a strong desire to code something on my own in Flash," explains Wohlwend. "I restricted my vision to something that felt achievable because I'm not a programmer. I also really dig creativity through restriction, so it wasn't a struggle at all to work within those limits."

Now released across iOS devices in January, *Hundreds* has received a strong critical and commercial reception.

"I am immensely satisfied with the wide audience we've managed to reach," says Saltsman. "Kids, grandparents, and 'gamers' all seem to enjoy *Hundreds*, and we didn't compromise our artistic vision at all in order to reach them, and that makes me feel so good. There is a transparency and pacing to *Hundreds* that makes it much more accessible than something like *Canabalt*, and I think that helps people who maybe don't think of themselves as videogame players to pick it up and get engrossed. I hoped we could do this, but seeing it actually happen has been immensely rewarding."

"I think it's incredible that we made exactly the game we wanted to make," adds Wohlwend. "Every aspect of the game is exactly what we wanted, not that arriving at that was easy, but it's the least I've ever had to compromise on a project and it worked out. It's kind of a surreal thing to have happen."

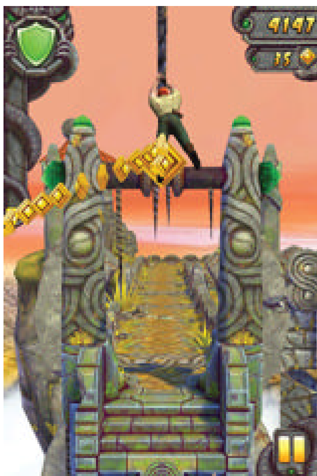


TEMPLE RUN 2

Developer: **Imangi Studios** Price: **Free**



THE RUNAWAY success that is *Temple Run* has spawned multiple imitators, but Imangi Studios has overhauled its original infinite runner with a more startling graphic engine and exotic backdrop. New power-ups and abilities offer a fresh slant on the action, but much of the classic formula returns unaltered. The monetisation system is a little more blatant but it's the same sprint towards inevitable death and endless restarts.



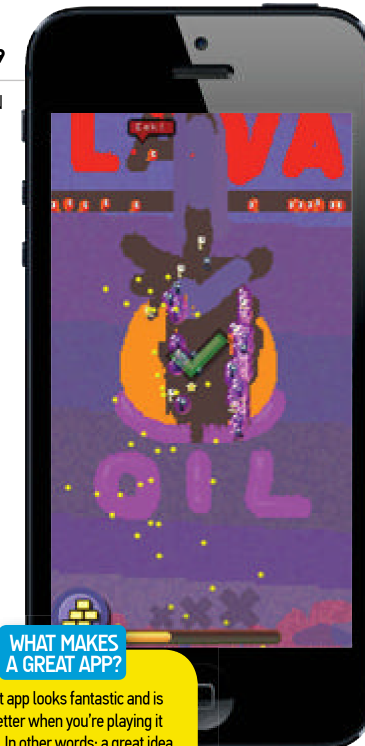
MICRO MINERS

Developer: **BonusLevel.org** Price: **£1.49**



A SUBTERRANEAN digging game where you command a squad of tiny diggers to harvest the ground, *Micro Miners* has garnered praise for its strategic gameplay and retro visuals. Developer Jean-Philippe Sarda admits it was inspired by Markus Persson's *Miners4K* Java game: "I adapted the game and hosted it on my game site (pepere.org) and it got millions of plays. In 2010, I made the prototype of the game and I immediately realised it was working very well on the touch screen." Two years later, *Micro Miners* was on the App Store. It's also due to launch on Google Play later in the year alongside an update bringing with it a new mode (Survival).

While Sarda cites his perseverance as his greatest achievement on the project, having worked alone on it for two years, he says, "Game design is the runner-up. This is quite unique gameplay; [it] was like working on the mechanisms of an accurate watch."



WHAT MAKES A GREAT APP?

"A great app looks fantastic and is even better when you're playing it in-depth. In other words: a great idea done well. A unique idea is something that happens rarely in a life. I've been spending a lot of time polishing not-so-great ideas, but this is not useless, I want to be ready for that idea."
Jean-Philippe Sarda, Bonuslevel.org

SPLINTER CELL BLACKLIST DELAY TO AUGUST SPARKS RUMOURS OF A JUMP TO NEXT-GEN SYSTEMS

Discuss

KNIGHTS OF PEN & PAPER

Developer: **Behold Studios** Price: **£1.49**



AS THE official synopsis reads: '*Knights Of Pen & Paper* is an indie turn-based retro-style pixel-art RPG. Inspired by the great titles of the '90s, you feel like [you're] playing a traditional pen-and-paper RPG.' If those two sentences somehow don't appeal to you, then you're probably dead inside. Of course, the concept is based on an antiquated hobbyist pursuit, but its exquisite presentation and the mischievous reverence it pays to the genre it's emulating make for a truly attractive combination of old-school gaming and contemporary accessibility.

WHAT MAKES A GREAT APP?

"I'm not the biggest *Angry Birds* fan in the world, but something I think it shares with *Hundreds* is a very transparent, 1:1, almost 'interfaceless' style of presentation, where the way to interact with the game is very easy to learn. There's this old adage about great games, that they should be 'easy to learn, but difficult to master'. I am a big believer in that, and I think the lower we set the learning bar, and the higher we set the mastery bar, the more interesting our games get."
Adam Saltsman, Semi Secret Software



RAVENSWORD: SHADOWLANDS

Developer: **Crescent Moon Studios** Price: **£4.99**



"TIME AND money," responds *Ravensword: Shadowlands* developer Josh Presseisen when asked what are the difficulties of creating a multifaceted RPG on iOS. "[It's] the sheer complexity of the game world and all of the items in it and the quality we try to achieve on a low budget – and yet still make something impressive."

This sequel *is* impressive, despite its modest roots: a yawning fantasy landscape to explore with a seemingly endless amount of quests to embark on. It's not quite *Skyrim*, but both the console-competitive visuals and mechanical comprehensiveness make it the closest thing you'll get for a while on iOS. "It took about two years to make," says Presseisen. "A lot of the time was spent just building assets and the framework for the game engine. Working with a small and scattered team also makes things difficult. We aren't a company with a bunch of employees - it's me, a handful of contractors and a programming partner. Everyone is in different parts of the world. Making a big game like this takes a lot of management skill and organisation."

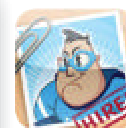
But overall, Presseisen and his team at Crescent Moon Studios are immensely proud of the game. "I believe the overall quality and size of the game is something that hasn't been achieved for a mobile RPG before," he says. "We're very proud that we pulled it off and were actually able to finish and release the game."

WHAT MAKES A GREAT APP?

"That's a very general question. A great app is anything that you find useful and you get your money's worth. Specifically in games it's one that keeps you interested and you feel your time was well spent playing."
Josh Presseisen, Crescent Moon Studios

MIDDLE MANAGER OF JUSTICE

Developer: **Dracogen /Double Fine** Price: **Free**

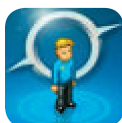


THERE WAS little doubt that Double Fine would excel at building a freemium game and *Middle Manager Of Justice* skirts around the cynical pitfalls that have befouled many past attempts. At its core, *Middle Manager Of Justice* is a straightforward management simulator – as the titular Middle Manager, you'll recruit spandex-clad superheroes to patrol the city and stop crime – but the game is founded on a solid monetisation system that puts fun first. Which is, obviously, great – especially given the omnipresence of Double Fine's trademark wit that imbues it with an appealing charm that its competitors simply can't compete with.



STAR COMMAND

Developer: **Star Command** Price: **TBC**



AT THE time of writing, *Star Command* has yet to reach digital storefronts, but we're assured it should beam in before **games™** arrives in newsagents. We've had our eye on this intergalactic strategy game since the Kickstarter launched in late 2011, the so-good-it-hurts pitch being *Game Dev Story* meets *Star Trek*. Assembling a crew of ambitious space pioneers is your first stop in exploring the universe, building a ship and thwarting alien threats to humanity. *Star Command*'s time hovering in development status has been spent bolstering its features, making the game more than just a throwaway fantasy sim.



TEMPLE RUN 2 IS DOWNLOADED 20 MILLION TIMES IN FOUR DAYS, PROVING THE POPULARITY OF MOBILE GAMES



PUDDING MONSTERS

Developer: **ZeptoLab UK** Price: **£0.69**

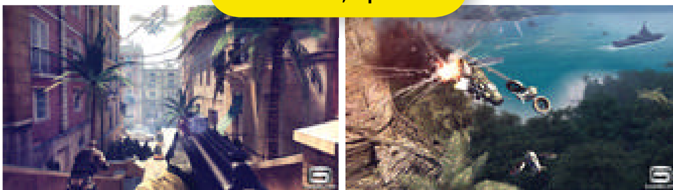


HAVING SUCCESSFULLY knocked *Angry Birds* from its perch with *Cut The Rope*, developer ZeptoLab's newest invention is another puzzler, involving throwing globs of anthropomorphic slime around a maze. "In ZeptoLab, we have regular contests for a best game idea," explains one half of the ZeptoLab co-founder twins, Efim Voinov. "Everyone in the company can participate. When one of our artists suggested the concept (which initially was called *Elevator Operator Vs Monsters*) it won the contest and seemed wacky and fun enough to get into production."

Pudding Monsters' design doesn't stray far from *Cut The Rope*'s template: an easy-to-grasp finger-flicking puzzle game with a sugar-sweet aesthetic. ZeptoLab may be playing it safe, but the project proved an invaluable opportunity for the studio to evolve its own development process. "As a programmer myself, I can't miss the fact that while developing *Pudding Monsters* we made a huge step forward with our internal tools," says Voinov. "We spent a decent amount of time improving our cross-platform development framework, which is a long-term investment that will help us create better games faster." The prospect of new games on the horizon is certainly no bad thing – if *Pudding Monsters* lacks anything then it's a sustained challenge. But ZeptoLab's latest firmly reinforces the studio's reputation for stunning art direction and inventive gameplay hooks. We can't help but want more.

WHAT MAKES A GREAT APP?

"A great app should be based on a simple idea. That means you can pick it up and quickly get the gameplay without much explanation. There are a few other important things, like appealing visuals or catchy soundtrack, but they won't save a game if its concept is too complicated."
Efim Voinov, ZeptoLab



MODERN COMBAT 4: ZERO HOUR

Developer: **Gameloft** Price: **£4.99**



IT WOULD be very easy to dismiss the *Modern Combat* series purely on the basis of derivativeness, but then its strengths are equal to those of its console influence. Top-notch explosions, robust combat controls, a huge array of multiplayer modes and crisp visuals. It's Activision's *Call Of Duty* then, only smaller and awkward to control, but it's the closest thing you're ever going to get to playing the ubiquitous shooting gallery franchise on iOS. Oh, and its dialogue features such treasures as "This shit isn't going to unf*** itself!" The 'games as art' debate continues…

COMING SOON TO THE SMALL SCREEN

The best iOS and Android games heading to a device near you in 2013

Infinity Blade: Dungeons

DEVELOPER: Epic Games

Epic launched Impossible Studios to pick up development duties on its action-RPG. Great news for the game; bad news for hitting deadlines – *Infinity Blade: Dungeons* has been delayed for several months.





Godus

DEVELOPER: 22cans

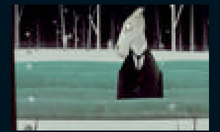
Peter Molyneux returns to the god game genre and this touch-screen *Populous*-a-like has enough visual flourish and gameplay innovations to suggest it might match Molyneux's hype.



Space Hulk

DEVELOPER: Full Control

The popular (well, in some circles) *Warhammer 40,000* spin-off will be receiving a turn-based strategy game on iOS at some point in 2013. It'll release alongside a PC and Mac version.



Year Walk

DEVELOPER: Simogo

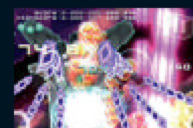
The *Bumpy Road* and *Beat Sneak Bandit* developer is crafting a whimsical 2D adventure exploring folklore, fantastical creatures and supernatural goings-on. It involves manipulating dimensional rifts.



Ace Attorney HD

DEVELOPER: Level-5

Capcom is bringing the first three DS outings of the spiky-haired barrister to iOS devices later in the year, with a slick HD polish and fine-tuned controls for touch-screen devices.



Danmaku Unlimited 2

DEVELOPER: Doragon

Five levels of pure bullet-hell shooter chaos, topped by gigantic boss battles, presented in crisp HD and running at 60 frames per second. You need know no more.



Fist Of Awesome

DEVELOPER: Nicoll Hunt

A pixel-art brawler inspired by *Streets Of Rage*, *Fist Of Awesome* has a lumberjack-type taking on the wilderness, engaging in a spot of pugilism with possessed deer and grizzly bears.

A BAD MONTH FOR RETAIL, WITH HMV, BLOCKBUSTER AND PLAY.COM ALL RUNNING INTO TROUBLE

#TRENDING
with NowGamer.com's Ryan King



Arcade culture in the UK is dying and, oddly, HMV could be its last stand...



Everyone forgot about Gamerbase. I'm not going to paraphrase *Forgot About Dre too* much, but while HMV found itself being sucked into the financial abyss, there was a lot of gibberish about the death of the high-street and motherfu... well. Certain people, I should say, acted like they forgot about Gamerbase, the 'replacement' for UK arcades. And perhaps with good reason. The concern is where we buy games and not where we play them, because we play them at home. That's obvious. Right?

Almost. Gamerbase stepped in when arcades began to falter and the apathy surrounding its demise shows how far that culture in the UK has fallen since July 2011, when London Trocadero's Funland arcade closed its doors. Funland was home to dancing games, shooting games, *Guitar Hero* cabinets, *Mario Kart Arcade GP* and a battered (naturally) *Bishi Bashi* cabinet. I mostly remember it for the fighting game community – *Street Fighter, Tekken* and *SoulCalibur.*

Funland's fighting game cabinets were poorly maintained. Sticks wouldn't work. Buttons would be missing. *Virtua Fighter 5* cost £1 for one credit. Management was so inept, it sometimes even worked out in favour of the players – the Street *Fighter III: 3rd Strike* cabinet was set to best of seven rather than best of three for almost six months before someone changed it back.

But it's important to understand how arcades served as social cornerstones for gaming communities in spite of those problems. Players visiting London knew they could go to the Trocadero on a Friday night and find kindred souls playing *Street Fighter* – UltraDavid from the US and Ino from Japan are two known *3rd Strike* players who passed through over the years.

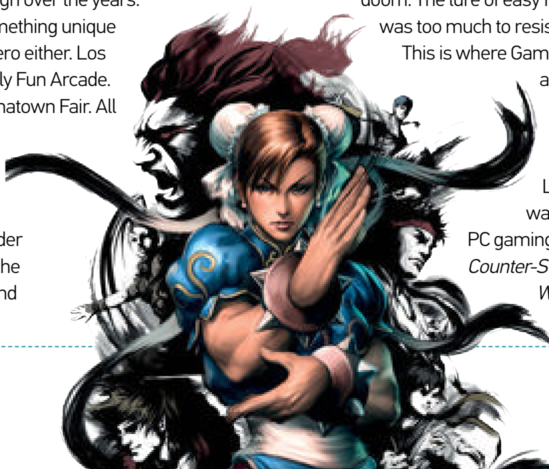
This wasn't something unique to London Trocadero either. Los Angeles had Family Fun Arcade. New York had Chinatown Fair. All three arcades are now closed.

No arcade was ready to step up and shoulder the burden when the Trocadero's Funland succumbed to a combination of high rent and dwindling players. Namco Station hasn't been relevant to anyone outside of curious tourists for years and Casino has morphed into a fruit machine den. Casino's fate, in particular, is a real shame. The Casino experience begun with walking down a steep, metal staircase into a hellish atmosphere. A broken air-con unit hung grimly from the ceiling and the ageing, stained carpet looked like it had been in place since the arcade opened in 1964, begrudging its rest being disturbed by noisy coin-op cabinets and noisier people.

> The apathy surrounding the potential demise of Gamerbase shows how far arcade culture in the UK has fallen since Funland closed its doors

Casino was like a secret underground haven among the noise of London. Not many tourists knew to go to Goodge Street station and look for the tiny, garish entrance past the KFC there. But slowly, like Trocadero, the fighting game community fell away from Casino too. The *3rd Strike* community dwindled when *Street Fighter IV* was released. The *Street Fighter IV* community dwindled when new series entries left the cabinets out of date. Xbox Live play became popular. People started playing from home. The shmup community still turned up until the bittr end but that couldn't save Casino from financial gloom and doom. The lure of easy fruit machine money was too much to resist.

This is where Gamerbase came in. An awkward gaming extension at the back of the flagship HMV store in London, Gamerbase was mostly used for PC gaming (*Team Fortress 2, Counter-Strike, World Of Warcraft*). Having already been used by Capcom for *Street Fighter IV* tournaments until the arcade cabinets arrived in the UK, it seemed like a natural new home for arcade players when Funland died.



Gamerbase grew to reflect what could have been the changing culture of arcade gaming in the UK. Staff were professional, polite, efficient. Tournaments were advertised on Twitter and Facebook rather than word of mouth and fliers. Live streaming ensured successful players had something of a cult status. It didn't have the spontaneous chaos of arcade gaming, but it was as close as anyone had come to capturing the magic of arcade gaming.

Whatever happens with Gamerbase, the (non) reaction to its potential demise tells its own story. Arcade culture in the UK was dealt a death blow when Funland closed and it hasn't recovered. Some of my favourite gaming memories come from the arcade. Justin Wong flying over from the US to take part in the Battle of Destiny tournament and heading straight to Casino from the airport, hitting a 20-win streak in *3rd Strike* before jetlag defeated him and he fell asleep on the floor. The *Virtua Fighter 5* credits in Funland being dropped to 50p and every serious player of Sega's beat-'em-up in London turning up that Friday, 40 players crowding around a machine cheering and booing.

There's no neat conclusion to this column except to say the only thing sadder than seeing arcade culture in the UK sink into oblivion is how the HMV news brought to light how few people nowadays truly care for it.

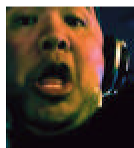
Ryan King is editor of NowGamer.com

GAME DEV STORY

with Q-Games' James Mielke



Japanese games are in for a tough year



As the much-documented balance of videogame development power shifts (or has shifted) from once-dominant Japanese game publishers to their Western counterparts, it seems that more than ever, in 2013, the impact of Japanese development efforts will be met with little to no fanfare whatsoever. While some of this can simply be attributed to matters of timing or other factors – like Japanese game publishers saving their big guns for the next wave of next-gen console releases – it remains that there is little to anticipate out of Japan. After all, Capcom released its deeply underwhelming *Resident Evil 6* in late 2012, and while the *Devil May Cry* reboot has been met with near-universal praise upon its release this January, remember that it was developed by Cambridge-based UK studio, Ninja Theory.

What else is there, specifically, to whet gamer appetites? Level 5's *Ni No Kuni* arrives, finally, three years after its original release in Japan, and despite its alliance with animation giant Studio Ghibli, it is shipping with its odd, Japanese title unaltered, and is a new IP shipping late in the PS3's life cycle. All things combined, a recipe for commercial disaster. Another RPG, Square Enix's pseudo-*Final Fantasy XIII* side-story, *Lightning Returns*, is likely to suffer from the law of diminishing returns, as well. The pair of games that preceded it were disappointing, saleswise, and the latest attempt to milk the world of Cocoon is only going to preach to the already converted, and probably not all of them either. The game doesn't even have a ship date, although if it does stay on track for 2013 it'll probably arrive by early fall, before the typical Q4 triple-A bloodbath.

This is not to say there won't be good games coming out of Japan, previously mentioned games included. But when scanning through the myriad gaming websites and publications, and their 'most anticipated games of 2013' rundowns, very few Japanese games were forthcoming. Of course, some games, like Namco Bandai's *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure: All-Star Battle* look absolutely amazing; but outside of Japan, the *JoJo* franchise is little known apart from in the fighting game community. And while anticipation levels for Capcom's *Monster Hunter 4* run high in Japan, where consumers can't get enough of that stuff, what *Monster Hunter* game has ever made a dent in the sales charts outside of its home country? That's the big problem the Japanese game industry faces this year, as sales dwindle and game publishers retreat behind a wall of safe sequels and licensed games they know will recoup their investments on their home turf.

> I'm starting to think that what the Japanese gaming industry needs to experience at this point is something of an implosion, and a rebirth

This, as you may have noticed, does not factor in Nintendo, which seems to be an island unto itself. Anyone who bought a Wii U (have you?) knows what to expect out of Miyamoto's stable of consistent, rock-solid studios, both internal and external. First-party Nintendo games always sell well, so they'll be the anomaly. When one thinks of Japanese games, one usually thinks of the Segas, Namco Bandais, Square Enixes, Konamis and Capcoms, usually as a group. And then one thinks of Nintendo, somehow separate from the rest, doing its own thing. 2013 won't do anything to break that trend, and it won't really be until E3 that we find out what else we have to look forward to from Nintendo, when it makes its usual Q4 push. But what about the intervening months? I can't personally name a game arriving for Wii U that's going to be a sure-fire blockbuster. Sure, I'm looking forward to the *Wonderful 101* and *Bayonetta 2*, but that also depends on whether I've bought a Wii U by the time they release.

The big wild card – and it'd be foolish to get my hopes up – is whether *The Last Guardian* is going to arrive this year. I would imagine it would have to, for a couple of reasons. After all the time Sony and Team Ico have pumped into the game, it'd be a much better proposition as a PS3 title than as a next-gen game, shipping on far fewer consoles. And if it were to push back to 2014, well, that'd just be a soul-crushing wait. Naturally, *Dark Souls II* is something to look forward to, but with original director Hidetaka Miyazaki limited to the role of overseer, my own anticipation dropped a couple of notches.

I'm starting to think that what the Japanese gaming industry needs to experience at this point is something of an implosion, and a rebirth, with talent culled from Japan's indie scene – much in the way the Western indie scene has reinvigorated both PC and console gaming. I mean, really, when the next-gen consoles are revealed, are you going to get amped up about a new *Ridge Racer* or *Tekken* or *Sonic* game at this point? No. What we need to see are fresh ideas from new minds, and that time can't come soon enough.

James Mielke is a producer at Q-Games



PHANTASY STAR ONLINE, TOO

■ OF ALL THE games over the past 12 years, the ones I played the most I can count on one hand: *Phantasy Star Online* (all versions), *Final Fantasy XI* (ditto), *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls*. *Dark Souls* is a game that feels like you're playing an MMO, but without bothering with party formations etc that involve other, unreliable people. But *PSO2*, for Vita, may soon replace that, as impressions of the PC game suggest that this marks a grand return to form for the series. My main concern, however, is that with the Vita's limited audience, new free-to-play business model and server-stored online-only characters, I have to wonder what the game's potential lifespan is. I hope its a long and healthy one, but the number of times I've seen a publisher like Konami shut down *Metal Gear Online*'s servers makes me wonder how committed Sega is for the long haul.

DmC Devil May Cry: your opinion

→ Its divisiveness has been unparalleled since it was announced; yet the release of the mesmerising DmC Devil May Cry reboot has vindicated Ninja Theory's most polarising design decisions. We've heaped praise on the unrelentingly frantic brawler – but now it's your turn. games™ asks the readers whether Dante's revised swagger does justice to Hideki Kamiya's enduring antihero…

■ "I think the fact that two years after its announcement, the negativity surrounding it proves fans need to move on"
@CryssLeonhart, Twitter

■ "No review I've read has mentioned the brilliant use of surround sound. Off-screen enemies [are] easy to find thanks to subtle sound cues"
@ToneSibley, Twitter

■ "It's an absolutely brilliant game. The artwork especially makes it stand out. Beautiful."
@DrWhoAlex1000, Twitter

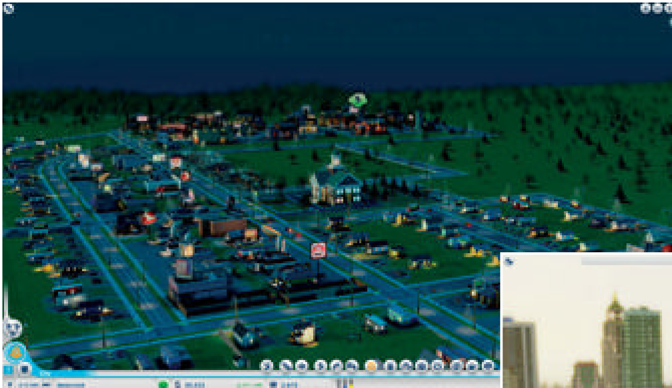
■ "Love it! Ninja Theory did a good job! Not like Criterion did with *NFS Most Wanted* LOL."
Shaine Price, Facebook

■ "Reached mission 4 so far, and if the game keeps up this pace it's going to be 2013's first 'must-play' game. Ninja Theory have done an excellent job; the combat feels instantly smooth and responsive. So far, so brilliant."
Andy Kurosaki, games™ forum

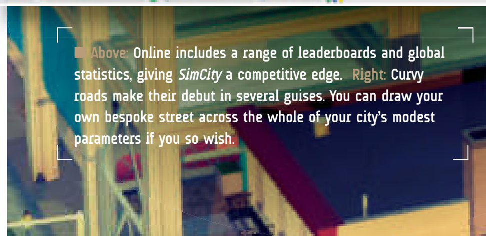
■ "I still struggle with the controls… with practically every button on the pad mapped to another function and being able to switch weapons mid-combo with the D-pad as well. It's overwhelming at times, but the dormant superior half of my brain likes the potential."
Maryokutai, games™ forum

■ "A decent score-attack game that lost all sense of cool"
@DJAnts, Twitter

From the moment you place that first stretch of tarmac, careful planning is integral to building a successful metropolis. Find yourself placing roads too closely together and buildings won't have the adequate space to expand.







Above: Online includes a range of leaderboards and global statistics, giving *SimCity* a competitive edge. Right: Curvy roads make their debut in several guises. You can draw your own bespoke street across the whole of your city's modest parameters if you so wish.

POWER OUTAGE

NOT A lot has changed. Or at least that's what it looks like from the perspective of **games**™. Comparing the current build with the state the game was in when we visited Maxis's San Francisco office last year, we barely notice one of the significant omissions. "We stripped out the power lines," says lead producer Kip Katsarelis. "That was early on. The entire interface was really tactile and when you popped down buildings there's a thud and we really wanted you to be part of the world, so the power lines didn't necessarily have a really gameplay function. It didn't really have a reason to be there so we took it out."

SimCity

CONCEPT ■ The long-awaited sixth instalment of the *SimCity* series places solid foundations for the franchise's future.

A whole new world

Everyone is dying. The industrial district of the nascent coastal city of Scarborough is billowing an ominous cloud of yellow smog, expanding at an exponential rate towards the densely populated metropolis located further inland. Placard-wielding citizens begin to protest at the town hall as pollution causes widespread disease and turmoil – the city's modest medical services fail to adequately treat the volume of inbound patients. Crime is suddenly rife; fires spread through the increasingly desolate-looking surroundings and, unless we're mistaken, we're pretty sure a fire-breathing dinosaur just incinerated the entirety of Scarborough's middle-class population. Well, at least the oil trade is booming.

Time for a do-over then. After a decade's absence, Maxis's pre-eminent *SimCity* franchise makes its long-mooted homecoming to the genre it almost single-handedly pioneered back in the Eighties. The transition from 2D to 3D has positively galvanised the franchise from statistic-based micromanagement to intimate agent-focused simulation on a street level. From following the individual Sims on the pavement to gauge their daily habits and desires, to the unique interdependent relationship shared with neighbouring cities, the new *SimCity* is leagues ahead of its predecessors.

It's an overwhelming proposition, then, but one with a breezy accessibility compared to previous instalments. You'll be inducted into the experience with a torrent of mini tutorials, help bubbles and hints that guide players over the course of the game's first few hours – a necessity given the breadth of features *SimCity* boasts – and the tangible interface welcomes rather than confounds. But what surprises most is how the depth and complexity of *SimCity* evidently refuses to be compromised; rather Maxis has bulldozed the obfuscation surrounding the existing systems.

"Some people said it couldn't be done," laughs lead producer Kip Katsarelis. "You've got these two extremes: *SimCity 4* was a pretty hardcore game, you had to be pretty savvy to play it; on the other hand we know there's a new casual market out there, people who have been introduced to city builders in a way and they're going to want to come and check this out."

/// Roads control everything in *SimCity*. The first order of business is connecting a piece of tarmac to the outside world and from there zoning can be applied to roadsides, designating the commercial, industrial and residential. Electricity, water and waste (viewable in any one of the infographic-style data layers) then flows naturally beneath the streets once connection to a relevant station is established – if a building is disconnected from the streets then expect all its resources to quickly shut down, resulting in a powerless, poo-filled landmark festering in one corner of your city. But what determines whether your neighbourhood will bloom into a bustling metropolis is the road density: if your strategy is to create a city rammed with cloud-piecing skyscrapers then high density roads are essential for traffic and construction; however, those with more modest ideals can opt out of upgrading smaller streets.

Much of the above is established within the early hours of the game, but this opening portion of the game is also the most integral. As *SimCity* nears completion, Maxis has been focus-testing the game extensively, adding

> "Gaming has changed so much over the last ten years and it's time for us to catch up"
> KIP KATSARELIS, MAXIS

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, Mac
Origin: US
Publisher: EA
Developer: Maxis
Release: 8 March
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Maxis (aka The Sultans of Sim) has been blasting out quality imitations of life for over 25 years. SimCity and The Sims have become stalwarts of the management sim genre, but the studio famously co-founded by Will Wright has covered just about everything from helicopters to ant farms.

Developer History

The Sims 3 **2009 [PC]**
Spore **2008 [PC]**
The Sims **2000 [PC]**
SimCity **1989 [Multi]**

High Point

The Sims would ultimately set the template for the studio's subsequent output with its in-depth simulation and breezy tone.





tutorials and hints where needed to make sure that the systems present are clearly detailed. "It's getting the game built and finding out the places where people are having troubles," explains Katsarelis. "That's why a lot of the bugs you saw today were done because we just added new mini tutorials. We get people in and playing it, we find out where the steady points are [and for those] we'll create tutorials."

The void left by *SimCity* over the last ten years has seen no shortage of city-builder-cum-despot-simulators muscle in on the territory, not to mention the advent of free-to-play examples offering a swathe of mobile approximations of *SimCity*'s time-sapping formula. For Maxis, it's an opportunity to broaden the appeal beyond existing fans of the series. "To me it's just opened a whole new audience to the genre," Katsarelis enthuses. "We call them casual gamers but they might be more hardcore than the ones we call hardcore. Who am I to say whether one game is better than another? They're getting enjoyment out of it and having fun and at the end of the day these are games. This is entertainment. We're here to entertain people. If we can entertain the hardcore audience, the creative audience, a storyteller and a casual gamer, then that's what we'll aim to do."

One much-vaunted new feature of the reboot is the inclusion of multiplayer. While not an obvious addition for the franchise, it overhauls existing strategies players familiar with the series may have. The key to successful multi-city gameplay is to develop a symbiotic relationship with neighbours, sharing resources and sticking to a speciality. One city could focus on industry, such as drilling for oil, while the neighbour establishes residential accommodation for commuters.

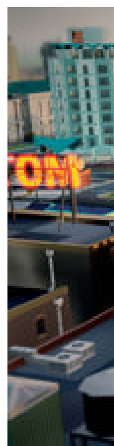
/// Working together like this can be mutually beneficial, but, in true Maxis style, there's always an opportunity to act like an utter bastard: pump out enough pollution and it'll drift into neighbouring areas and when your town is nothing but a post-apocalyptic husk, crime will vacate to the nearest city. How you choose to run your city will have a drastic affect on those around you. "It's so clear that gaming has gone online and connected and multiplayer – people want to play with others," says Katsarelis on the decision to take *SimCity* online. "I remember when I would lug my computer in my car to my friend's house to play games together. Now I can push a button and play with other people. There's an appetite for that."

Multi-city play is equally essential offline as it is on and nestled between neighbouring

"It's getting the game built and finding out the places where people are having troubles"
KIP KATSARELIS, MAXIS

SIM UNIVERSE

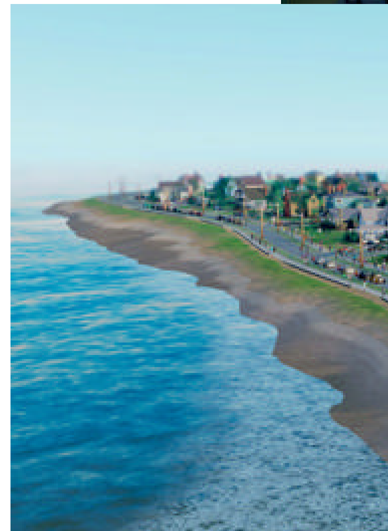
IN MUCH the same vain as Autolog and Battlelog before it, *SimCity* will introduce the Simlog to the world of *The Sims*. We suggest to Kip Katsarelis that this may have wider implications to the wider *Sims* universe, but while he coyly dodges addressing the future of his popular brand, he does talk about the noticeable synergy between the two properties. "*The Sims* spawns from *SimCity*," he is keen to point out. "We're Maxis, this is who we are. A lot of the people worked on *The Sims* games before. Even our advisors we took from *The Sims 3*. You'll see more crossover too and people playing *The Sims* playing *SimCity*, so there's something familiar for *The Sims* fans who want to come over."



Above: There are various map views that enable players to gauge how your city is performing on multiple levels. It provides even more depth to the already impressive showing from Maxis.
Right: A thick cloud of smog, destitute citizens and fires breaking out all across the city – our virtual city of Scarborough is disturbingly accurate. Zooming into your city reveals the true beauty of the tilt-shift aesthetic. Every part of the simulation moves around like a joyous toytown created by a kid in his bedroom. It should at least give the game a wider appeal.



Above: Multi-city play is integral to the experience, sharing resources and offloading toxic responsibilities to another neighbouring city to benefit yours. While you can benefit by working together, you can also work against a nearby metropolis. Right: An indicator that your city is a success is when the roads begin to clog up with traffic. Upgrading roads can increase the capacity for vehicles, as well as dictate how your city evolves.















conurbations is an area accessible once you've accumulated a specified amount of Simoleons, Sims and materials. These 'Great Works' appear to be the ultimate goal of *SimCity* – a monumental endeavour to build a space centre, a solar farm or a fan-pleasing centre of arcology. The quickest way to reach this is through the aforementioned city specialisations. A cursory glance at the data maps will indicate whether there's a precious resource located beneath the land; but if coal, oil or ore deposits are not available, embarking on a commercial enterprise such as a casino city is a viable alternative. Building up a successful specialisation increases the mayor's approval ratings, enabling further enhancements to be made to buildings and local amenities, and generally boosts the income of the town.

A quicker alternative is to cheat. It's an aspect of the reboot that has concerned some, assuming that the option to input cheat codes will be omitted given the move to online and competitive leaderboards. However, Maxis has confirmed that cheats will be included when the game arrives next month. "As we unveiled the game we had our hardcore community asking for a sandbox, asking for cheats," Katsarelis says. "At first we wanted to put constraints on the game where you had to earn your money and compete on the leaderboards, but now we've realised we have to cater for that audience as well. We've now got a sandbox mode so you can play cheats and be disconnected from leaderboards."

It's one step to placate the concerns of the fans willing to accept nothing but the perfect *SimCity* experience after a decade in the dark. The 2k by 2k size limit has its benefits given the multi-city gameplay and any qualms about depth can be dismissed after hours poring over the mayor's approval ratings, analysing land value and maintaining RCI needs. Ultimately, every facet of the multidimensional simulation enables the player to carefully plan and cultivate the city that they want to build, rather than adhere to the regimented evolution offered in previous games. The fact that it manages to do so in way that neither panders to nor alienates newcomers is a small miracle in itself.

We only have one question to ask: why did it take Maxis ten years to create what is arguably shaping up to be the best *SimCity* yet? "We had a very particular idea in mind," states Katsarelis. "*SimCity* has always been 2D; we wanted to build a 3D world. We wanted to change the simulation from something that was more statistical to something that was more agent based. There's more integrity to the simulation and computers a decade ago weren't powerful enough to do what we're doing now with the Glass Box engine. We also wanted to do multiplayer and be online. Gaming has changed so much over the last ten years and it's time for us to catch up. We're finally 3D, we're finally online and these are some big hurdles for *SimCity*. It was all about getting the right team, the right idea and technology all together. Now is the time."



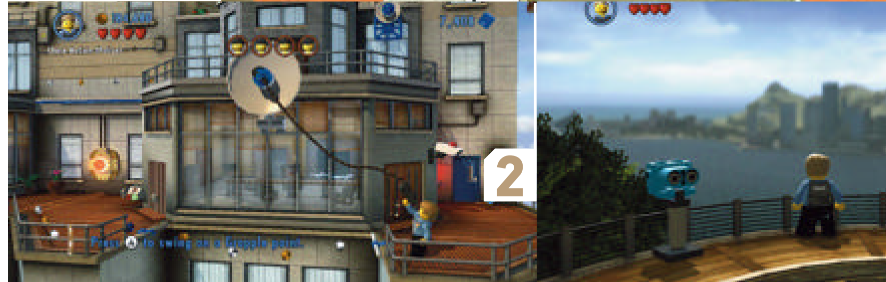
Lego City Undercover

CONCEPT ■ Like *GTA*, but everyone is made of yellow plastic. It's an irresistible concept, one that breaks the shackles of the movie-licence-reliant series.

Why the latest Lego game is an important step for the franchise



1



2

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Wii U
Origin: UK
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: TT Fusion
Release: Early 2013
Players: 1

Developer Profile

TT Fusion is a subsidiary of TT Games, specialising primarily in developing handheld ports of key titles – most of them Lego based. Still, not to be overshadowed by its more widely known stablemate Traveller's Tales, the studio has also worked on console versions of *Lego Rock Band* and *Lord Of The Rings: Aragorn's Quest.*

Developer History

Spy Hunter
2012 [PSVita, 3DS]

Lego Rock Band
2009 [Multi]

Guinness World Records: The Videogame
2008 [Multi]

Lego Star Wars: The Complete Saga
2007 [DS]

High Point

Luckily the Lego franchise lends itself gracefully to handheld ports and *Lego Star Wars: The Complete Saga* retains its charm whatever the platform.

What is the appeal of a Lego game if it's not the status of its identifiable licence? Is there gratification to be found in eternally punching bricks even if you're not sporting a dusty fedora, cape and cowl, or some futuristic light sword? It's a question that is surely rattling around in someone's mind over at Nintendo as the publisher prepares to launch the first major deviation from the standard template of TT Games' enduring series of joyous brick-based platformers.

Lego City Undercover is a risky proposition then, but one that to date has certainly won the attention of gamers with hyperbolic comparisons to *Grand Theft Auto* – although, obviously, being far more accessible. With a sprawling open world to explore and the irresistible charm of Lego at its core, there's every chance that this Wii U exclusive might just be the breath of fresh air that fans of the franchise have been waiting for.

1 WORLD VIEW

WITH ITS open-world interpretation of Gotham City, *Lego Batman 2: DC Super Heroes* was the first opportunity for Traveller's Tales to melt down the linear template of the Lego games and mould it back into something innovative. *Lego City Undercover* continues the open-world theme, lifting inspiration for its municipality mostly from San Francisco – prison island Albatross is a barely disguised riff on Alcatraz – and imbuing the setting with a genuine sense of wonder. With a massive city to explore, TT Fusion has made sure there are plenty of ways to get around…

> "The massive, open world of Lego City lets players explore the city using numerous vehicles from the real-life play sets"
> NINTENDO PRESS RELEASE















2 YELLOW BRICK ROAD

A GAGGLE of air, sea and land vehicles offer the player various means to explore the world around them, but these conventional modes of transport are exactly that: traditional. To see the city in style, you need look no further than the grapple gun. Players can launch themselves across the city at great height and speed, covering a massive amount of distance in a short space of time. It's the sort of unpretentious embellishment appropriate to the simplistic thrills that the Lego franchise delivers so majestically.

3 CHIP OFF THE OLD BLOCK

WHILE NO longer tethered to the linearity of a popular licence, the allure of nostalgia has not escaped developer TT Fusion. *Lego City Undercover*'s yellow-faced star is Chase McCain, a police officer on the trail of the nefarious Rex Fury. All cocksure attitude and cheesy zingers, Chase is born from Eighties cop show swagger – among a plethora of homages and clichés ripped from decades of pop culture. It may no longer be tethered to a familiar brand, but don't expect *Undercover* to abandon the lampooning altogether.

4 BRICKULAR MANSLAUGHTER

EACH OF the Lego games has had a playful approach to the inherent violence – guns, swords and explosive have all had a place among the collectable trinkets and studs. So it's surprising that *Undercover* tones down the intensity of its action: civilians walking along the pavement can't be run over and firearms have been outlawed. Still, a mix of parkour and melee combat unite to create a satisfyingly dynamic range of action, not to mention a range of costumes that endow Chase with unique abilities.

5 NINTENDO GAMEFAD

LEGO CITY Undercover is without a doubt one of the more interesting exclusives scheduled post-launch for the Wii U. However, its GamePad use is disappointingly pedestrian: a GPS map consumes the second screen, while a scanner enables the player to scan the environment for potential perps. It's a shame TT Fusion hasn't stretched beyond the increasingly run-of-the-mill design that we have seen come as standard with every new Wii U release. 

■ Below: Luigi can now take on up to three ghosts at a time – no easy task, especially when they start vanishing and hiding behind furniture.





INFORMATION

Details

Format: 3DS
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Next Level Games
Release: April 2013
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Next Level Games has built a strong profile for itself over the years. Based out of Vancouver, Canada, it formed in 2002 and has been quietly been developing some of Nintendo's most popular franchises.

Developer History

Mario Smash Football
2005 [GC]
Mario Strikers Charged Football
2007 [Wii]
Punch Out!!
2009 [Wii]
Captain America Super Solider
2011 [Multi]

High Point

After woeful efforts from Sega to bring the Marvel roster to consoles, Next Level brought the world of Captain America to life in a fun, often overlooked, adventure.

Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon

CONCEPT ■ Luigi returns to what he does best – busting ghosts in a creepy mansion in this long-awaited sequel.

Who ya gonna call?

Occupying a sibling's shadow is never an easy thing to live with, especially when that older sibling is routinely getting the girl and saving the kingdom. This is a curse Luigi has had to bear since *Mario Bros* in '83, routinely settling for the comedic relief role alongside the most famous face in gaming.

With the GameCube, though, Nintendo gave Luigi the chance of a lifetime. He helped debut the console with the oft-forgotten *Luigi's Mansion*, a game that asked players to strap on a vacuum and bust ghosts to clear out a mansion Luigi famously won in a competition he never entered. It was a fun but flawed adventure, and while it's impossible to dispute the technical achievements, Nintendo failed to fully execute its vision, producing a title that no amount of charm could amend.

A decade later then, Nintendo is returning to Evershade Valley with *Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon*, a title that has all the promise the debut outing displayed, while meticulously expanding on the core concepts that fell short in the past. Without doubt one of games™'s most anticipated 3DS titles of 2013, even in this early build the game looks more than comfortable sitting alongside *Super Mario 3D Land* as the king of 3DS adventure games.

The familiar task of cautiously exploring rooms one-by-one for keys to expand the game-world returns, with plenty of puzzles and supernatural spectres to take down along the way. This time out Luigi has three mansions to tackle, assisted by the ever-helpful (if not slightly creepy) Professor E Gadd, who breaks each down into a series of missions. The missions vary from simply searching for keys to hunting for upgrades and tracking specific types of ghouls. Thankfully the mansions have evolved and while the intimacy of the original *Luigi's Mansion* remains, everything from level design to variation of enemy types is much improved.

/// The mechanics have evolved too, with Luigi now able take on multiple ghosts at once and with the improved Poltergust 5000, ghostbusting has never been more enjoyable. As you root through rooms to unearth keys, ghosts will turn up to deter your search. Activating a strobe light to stun them will open a brief window of opportunity to pull the ghosts in with the vacuum, though they'll drag and throw Luigi into furniture to try to break the suction grip. The game of tug-of-war is an engaging, if not frantic, experience – but getting the final containment is oddly satisfying.

You'd think multiple ghosts would be enough to spice up the difficulty, but Next Level Games has added a large amount of variation to the battles to keep things interesting. Some ghosts will don sunglasses, so you need to find a way to remove them before attempting a stun. Others will vanish quickly, while some will simply sit back and attack from range. With the 3DS only having one circle pad, Luigi can't aim and move simultaneously, forcing you to change your tactics on the fly.

Before going hands-on, we were admittedly cautious. Nintendo handed development over to Vancouver-based Next Level Games and while we didn't doubt the studio's abilities, so many fail to replicate many facets of Nintendo's design ethic. From what we've played it's clear Next Level has done a sublime job, with *Dark Moon* retaining the charm that gamers came to love, and the tight controls that are often associated with a Nintendo game.

> "Players need to activate a new strobe function to stun the ghosts before sucking them up with the Poltergust 5000"
> MARTIN SCHNEIDER NINTENDO PR

Considering the depth of gameplay and the variety of locations, enemy types and unlockable items, *Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon* is far more appealing than its predecessor in almost every respect. If you're desperate for an excuse to turn your 3DS on, this is undoubtedly the game to watch throughout 2013.





Right: *Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon* is expanding on almost everything its predecessor introduced. With three mansions for Luigi to explore, expect creepier challenges to present themselves as you progress.



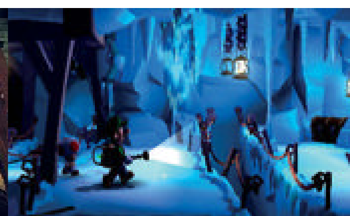




SWITCHING SYSTEMS

THE TRANSITION from GameCube to 3DS isn't as drastic as you might expect. Considering the rather limited face buttons on the hardware, many aspects of design have remained the same. The fixed camera returns, producing wonderful optical illusions thanks to the 3D functions of Nintendo's system. Next Level Games has had to alter the controls drastically, mind; with the singular circle pad limiting Luigi to either movement or aiming, it creates a ghostbusting game that relies heavily on precision rather than blindly stumbling about the clutter-laden rooms that litter the mansion.





Left: Enemies have a hit counter that you need to whittle down by gripping them with the Poltergust's suction cone. They will try to escape quickly, so proficient use of the strobe light is necessary. Above: Locations are varied this time around, with Luigi investigating classic Nintendo-themed rooms, icy lairs and darkened dungeons.









Dead Island: Riptide

CONCEPT ■ H20 is the deadly ingredient employed in the sequel to Techland's 2011 sleeper hit. Oh, and more zombies obviously.

A ticket to paradise

Deep Silver's creative director Guido Eickmeyer addresses *Dead Island: Riptide*'s short development time, dynamic weather features and whether the zombie sub-genre has reached a plateau.

It has been a relatively short amount of time since the release of the original game; did you expect to attract negative comments dismissing it as a quick cash-grab to capitalise on the original's success?

We started the development in the final phase of our first instalment. For a standalone game, we felt we needed to do more than just producing an add-on in respect to the overall depth and playtime. If our intention would have been to grab the money and run, we would not have invested this much. In today's transparent market, you simply cannot afford to milk a relatively new IP, instead of building on trust and quality. *Dead Island: Riptide* is not '*Dead Island 2*' – a completely new take requires a lot more time, as you want to work on fundamental things, but it will be a very, very nice mix between adding content and bringing in some new elements that add to and redefine the overall experience.

Was there a particular area of the original game that you sought to improve in the sequel?

Well, we were not too happy with the first release in regards to initial stability, performance and several balancing issues that could harm the overall experience. I believe this is something we need to improve and we had some very serious discussions about that in the past months. On the gameplay side, co-operative multiplayer always needs some fresh elements, new challenges and something that provides a different angle to what our fans are used to. If I had to pick a specific feature or element, I think the improvements in co-op teamplay are really pushing this game to a new level.

What differentiates this island from the one featured in the original in terms of hazards and dangers that will plague players during their visit?

Banoi was still a paradise island and you could easily imagine the world before the outbreak. Now we add a new enemy to the game as the relentless power of nature turns into a threat itself. Weather plays a significant role in our changes to the setting, but it is just one of the elements we had in mind to turn *Dead Island: Riptide* into a fresh, unique experience. From beginning to the end, players will see completely new places and face a lot of obstacles that come with the hazards.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 3, Xbox 360
Origin: Poland
Publisher: Deep Silver
Developer: Techland
Release: 26 April
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Techland's gameography stretching back to the late Nineties contains a few notable entries, including the *Call Of Juarez* series and *Nail'd*.

Developer History

Nail'd
2010 [Multi]
Call Of Juarez
2006 [Multi]
Chrome
2003 [PC]

High Point

An ambitious attempt at doing something different, *Dead Island* remains the studio's boldest effort.



Eickmeyer rather effectively describes the tone of the *Dead Island* franchise as "less *24 Days Later* and more *Zombieland*."



Crafting is one of the new features implemented in the sequel. This little touch of *Minecraft* will do much to separate the *Dead Island* franchise from Valve's superior *Left 4 Dead* series.

For more screens go to www.nowgamer.com



Water is a major element in *Dead Island: Riptide* – what new features did this open up in terms of mechanics and missions?

Water changes the rules of movement. Some ways are blocked and limit your actions while you gain access to new ones. It effects your thinking process as you find yourself in an environment you are not familiar with and therefore the element of exploration will differ to what our players are used to. In addition, water adds a new dimension to the game. You are used to looking around all the time, expecting enemies from all around you. Now they might even come from below, which should not only scare hell out of you, but turns the flooded parts of the island into a very uncomfortable and unpredictable place.

Do you think the zombie sub-genre has reached a plateau, or that there's still, ahem, life left in it?

Maybe. Every entertainment industry has this effect of everyone jumping on the next bandwagon. After you have a couple of million units sold of a certain type of game or theme, you can expect a lot of me-too products waiting to capitalise on that success. For our beloved zombies, it was fun to see how many big guns – as well as small teams and even indie developers – would incorporate themed levels and add-ons in their games. My personal take on this one is: you better think anti-cyclical in this industry. At some point, both casual and hardcore gamers will have seen 'enough' and look for something else. Zombies will eat brains and flesh for years to come, but the hype will be gone at some point and the massive audiences will move on to something new.

I believe we are well prepared for the future and our plans should not be affected by market saturation. Gamers want to be entertained, challenged and love innovation. Looking at the sales curves, at the long-time success we had, examining the playtime numbers and user behaviours, we understand this as a franchise that is driven by challenging co-operative gaming, innovative elements, a unique setting and game world, massive exploration – and it is about gamers creating their own stories and memories. That is what we will keep in focus and while you should not expect us to leave zombies out of future titles, we do not see them as the core.

In difference to the major franchises such as *Call Of Duty*, we cannot simply change the setting and backstory and keep our gaming experience similar across multiple titles, focus on polishing and hammer out production value fireworks. We need to come back to the basic principles of game mechanics and 'fun' and significantly recalibrate the experiences every time - which should be good news for gamers looking for innovation and creative approaches. We came out of nowhere and received our rewards for a risk-friendly take on game publishing and development. This is what we will keep in mind for this franchise's future. 

> "If our intention would have been to grab the money and run, we would not have invested this much"
> GUIDO EICKMEYER, DEEP SILVER

THE POWER OF ADVERTISING

THE ORIGINAL *Dead Island* teaser trailer was a worldwide sensation, but didn't correlate to the game that strongly. Asked whether the sequel will feature a stronger emotional core closer in tone to its marketing, Eickmeyer rebuts, "Stronger? I believe *Dead Island* has been dominant in its emotional core… Teaming up and beating up hordes of undead – that was surely an intense experience and fun like hell. We do not intend to produce a narrative-driven experience with *Riptide* – we believe that co-op and exploration games should be defined by user stories."

Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate

CONCEPT ■ Capcom finally gives *Monster Hunter* the HD upgrade it's long deserved, but is the publisher giving the franchise the justice it deserves?

Get yourself ready, it's time to go back on the hunt

It continues to baffle us how *Monster Hunter* still hasn't broken into the mainstream consciousness of the West. It's a relatively straightforward concept to grasp – in fact, it's all in the name. It's a game that actively encourages you to find your largest sharp pointy weapon and hunt spectacularly sized monsters; the idea alone should be enough to entice even the most average of gamers.

Of course, beneath the surface lies one of the richest action-RPGs available on the market – a series that thrives off players correctly assessing situations, learning the lay of the land and preparing for the fight of their lives, and this was the precedent set long before *Dark Souls* became the hardcore go-to for an addictive challenge. That's not to say Capcom doesn't have its work cut out. Despite being immensely popular in its native Japan, *Monster Hunter* has never caught on in the West, perhaps due to its release on systems with poor multiplayer infrastructure or lacking exposure to 'hardcore gamers'.

Like most things in life, hunting monsters is best done with a trusty companion by your side, especially one with a colossally sized sword. This is where *Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate* is going to excel. Prepped for release this March for the Nintendo 3DS and Wii U, *Ultimate* is not only promoting a fully fledged online service via the Nintendo Miiverse, but it is also promoting cross-play between the two systems. Locally up to four friends will be able to team up regardless of the format they purchased and, most interestingly, you can even port your save data from one version to the other, meaning you can continue to hunt while on the move.

/// There are consequences for such luxuries of course, and while Wii U *Ultimate* marks the debut of *Monster Hunter* in high definition, it is but an HD remaster of the 3DS instalment – which itself is no more than an upgraded version of the Wii's 2009 release *Monster Hunter Tri*. Lack of original content aside, we have major concerns with the graphical prowess of *Ultimate*. It's not afraid to swing wildly between incredibly impressive to disappointingly lacklustre. The monsters themselves look fantastic and the standard camera view looks beautiful on Wii U, but zoom in a little closer or switch to your character inventory screen and the lack of detail quickly becomes apparent. Some concessions were always going to be made when designing a game that worked seamlessly between handheld and home console, but it's disappointing nonetheless. We can only hope that if *Ultimate* succeeds in the sales game, Capcom will consider bringing a fully fledged, built-from-the-ground-up next-generation *Monster Hunter* to our GamePads in the future.

Mechanically *Ultimate* plays very similarly to the aforementioned *Monster Hunter Tri*. While slightly more accessible than the PSP versions released over the years, it still requires plenty of finesse, concentration and time to progress through the game. Don't get us wrong, the concept is something everyone should be able to get behind, but *Monster Hunter* is relentlessly addictive and before long you'll wonder how a hundred-plus hours have been logged and where the entirety of your week has gone. For those willing to hunt, capture and kill without concern for personal sanity or sanitation, *Monster Hunter* becomes an incredibly deep and rewarding experience, and *Ultimate* is no different, regardless of what system you pick it up on.

Truthfully, taking down a tough monster and rationing its body to use as food to recover from your long day of hunting, or using its hide to develop new themed armour sets, is one of the most rewarding experiences you are likely to find in gaming today. Reservations about Capcom's release/remaster ethic aside, *Monster Hunter 3 Ultimate* is shaping up to be a must-have game for both the 3DS and Wii U for those desperate for more releases tailored to the hardcore gamer.

> "With over 200 quests, the latest [addition] to the series is set to be the most expansive offering to date"
>
> CAPCOM PRESS RELEASE

INFORMATION

Details

Format: 3DS, Wii U
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: In-house
Release: 22 March 2013
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Originally established in 1983, Capcom is one of the largest developers and publishers of videogames in the world. While it has had massive success with the likes of *Street Fighter* and *Resident Evil*, its greatest achievement is perhaps the *Monster Hunter* series: not only has it become a Japanese institution, it's one of Capcom's most successful franchises to date.

Developer History

Monster Hunter **2004 [PS2]**
Monster Hunter Freedom **2005 [PSP]**
Monster Hunter Tri **2009 [Wii]**
Monster Hunter Tri G **2011 [3DS]**

High Point

Monster Hunter Tri proved to be a new awakening for the *Monster Hunter* series, long-dormant in the West, with many of the franchise's core concepts polished for the console audience.









■ Above: *Monster Hunter Tri* players will feel at home with the structure of *Ultimate*, but expect new enemies, new weapons and more quests for the Guild.

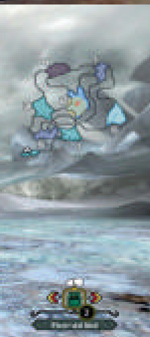


■ Above: *Monster Hunter* can look breathtaking at times, with the jump to HD really doing the long open wastelands wonders, though sharing a port with the 3DS can hinder it at times. Below: Bringing friends to a fight is always wise. While the first few hours present little in the way of challenges, the difficulty quickly scales – forcing you to either get quick on your feet, or hook your Wii U up to the Miiverse.

NEW WAYS TO HUNT

TRADITIONALLY *MONSTER Hunter* games were exclusive to Sony platforms, but since moving into the innovative world of Nintendo, Capcom has been able to implement new ways to hunt. While the 3DS's new features start and finish with the additional Circle Pad Pro, the Wii U system has fully integrated the GamePad into the fray. The map, inventory and equipment screens can now easily be navigated on the move with the touch of a finger. It's a small but useful enhancement. Nobody wants to get lost while being chased by a teeth-baring monster, and with the series finally making the transition to HD, the less the screen is cluttered with pointless HUD markers the better.















Above: The Science Machine is incredibly useful as it allows Wilson to do the research that will ensure his survival upon the island. Feeding items into the machine generates research points that fuel Wilson's chances of learning to create new items.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: Canada
Publisher: Klei Entertainment
Developer: In-house
Release: March 2013
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Klei is a small Canadian developer that specialises in creating innovative digital titles, mainly for Xbox Live Arcade and PC. Its past titles include the popular scrolling fighter *Shank*, which was published by Electronic Arts, and the rather excellent stealth game *Mark Of The Ninja*.

Tecmo History

Mark Of The Ninja
2012 [Xbox 360/PC]
Shank
2010 [Multi]
N+
2008 [Xbox 360]
Eets
2006 [PC/Mac]

High Point

With its distinctive visuals, gruesome killings and inventive, open-ended gameplay, *Mark Of The Ninja* is a top stealth game.

Don't Starve

CONCEPT *Don't Starve* is Klei Entertainment's inventive take on the *Rogue*-like genre.

Klei Entertainment proves that it's not who you know, it's what you know

As the current generation of consoles stubbornly lumbers on, the PC is quickly proving itself to be one of the most diverse and versatile platforms around. While even an average rig is capable of playing most triple-A console games with very little effort, it's the many indie games that really show off the imagination found in the vast majority of PC titles at the moment.

Don't Starve is the latest example of this and while Klei Entertainment's incoming game belongs to one of gaming's oldest genres (in this case the *Rogue*-like), it's also packed with the sort of imagination that only the best indie developers seem capable of conjuring up.

Don't Starve sees antagonist Wilson – other characters are available later – waking up on a mysterious island with only the clothes on his back to keep him company. After a few words from a mysterious demon who has trapped him in his island hell, Wilson must fend for himself and survive for as long as possible. *Don't Starve* is currently playable in beta form and is available to buy from the developer itself (http://kleientertainment.com) or from Steam. Buying the game now grants you early access,





meaning you can immediately start playing this enchanting and inventive title.

The lack of hand-holding in *Don't Starve* is truly refreshing. As soon as your tormentor disappears, you have to start scouring the game world for usable items. Things like flowers are easily picked, but twigs and grass take a little more time to gather. And time is constantly against you, as each day revolves around a simple eight-minute clock. Before night comes, which lasts for two minutes, you'll need to gather enough resources to build a fire so that you can survive the night.

/// A standard fire can be made from simply combining grass and logs, but first you'll need to find a way of getting the log (or rocks if you want to create something more permanent). Trees are abundant on the island, but you won't be able to cut any of them down until you can create an axe, and for that you'll need… And so it goes on. *Don't Starve* cleverly introduces new ideas to the player, who must use their head to work out what items can be combined together in order to ensure survival.

It's brutally tough at first – just surviving a few days is a Herculean task – but as with the likes of *Dark Souls*, failure soon reaps rewards. You'll quickly learn that flint, a precious commodity, must quickly be tracked down so that you can build the many tools that will allow you to cut down trees, mine rocks and dig holes. Create the Science Machine and you'll receive a staggering insight into just how intricate the game is. It shows off a tantalising range of items that will allow you to grow crops, build weapons for killing the island's dangerous inhabitants and even create bee mines. You'll need to successfully research them first, however, which requires you to dump collected items into the machine to gain research points. With more points you can unlock more things (the knowledge of which stays with you once Wilson inevitably dies), but it also means fewer resources to survive with.

The end result is a clever balancing act, with you desperately trying to work out how to stop yourself from starving, while ensuring that you have the time to forage for the precious resources that you need to get you through each night and fight off the deadly and quirky-looking enemies found throughout the game's stylish environments.

Don't Starve may still be in beta form, but it's already shaping up to be one of the most inventive games of 2013. With its open-ended gameplay, distinctive quirky visuals and cleverly structured gameplay, *Don't Starve* proves that even the oldest of gaming genres can have fresh new life breathed into them if they're handled with enough care and attention. 

> "Enter a strange and unexplored world. Play your way as you unravel the mysteries of this strange land"
> PRESS RELEASE KLEI ENTERTAINMENT

Below: *Don't Starve*'s visual style is extremely distinctive, with the characters and backgrounds reminding us of the works of Tim Burton.



EXPLORE AND CONQUER

THE STRANGE world Wilson finds himself in is teeming with life, most of which is intent on killing him in as many nasty ways as possible. Spiders are abundant and deadly, but they need to be destroyed in order to use their silk to craft needed items; the same can be said for many of the other dangerous beasties. The environment itself needs to be thoroughly explored as the island is split into segments which have distinctive traits and monsters in them. As in many *Rogue*-like games, Klei Entertainment has also included the ability to rebuild the island each game, meaning that no two visits will ever be the same, so you could effectively explore this mysterious world forever.

Above: The different items Wilson can craft are shown on the left-hand side of the screen. At first, only simple things like tools and fire are available, but as the game progresses you'll be able to create weapons, magic and even natty hats.



1 OPENING WITH a trainer staring back at himself in a mirror, it looks like trainer customisation is finally on the cards. After six generations of strapping on a backpack and running off into the wild, letting players finally add a personal touch to their avatar seems like a natural evolution of the social side to Pokémon. No one wants to be the very best at anything when your rival is wearing a matching hat.

Pokémon X and Y

CONCEPT ■ *Pokémon* finally comes hurtling into the next-generation with this exciting new look for the 3DS.

Making it more impossible to Catch 'Em All?

We are always quick to overlook new iterations of *Pokémon*. Aside from expanding the Pokédex, Game Freak has barely evolved the popular monster-hunting RPG over its 16 years of life. The franchise has been woefully absent from the 3DS line-up, and Nintendo's decision to head into sequel territory with *Black 2* and *White 2* – instead of exploring new polygonic frontiers – disappointed, but *X* and *Y* has renewed our faith. *Pokémon*'s first full 3D adventure is brimming with potential. Despite the new console and new graphics, Game Freak assures us this isn't a full reboot. We can expect to see many of the core concepts that have defined the series expanded upon and, most excitingly, 3DS-specific features like scalable 3D and StreetPass fully integrated. *Pokémon X* and *Y* has a simultaneous worldwide release this October, so start handing out those friend codes and preparing your Elite Four tactics. *Pokémon* is about to become the biggest franchise in gaming all over again.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: 3DS
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Game Freak
Release: October 2013
Players: 1

Developer Profile

While Game Freak is best know for *Pokémon*, its roots lie in publishing. Founded in the 1980s by Satoshi Tajiri and Ken Sugimori, it ran a self-publishing gaming magazine before moving into development. The developer released *Mario & Yoshi* in 1991 before Nintendo handed it the keys to its hugely popular pocket monsters franchise. Game Freak has been developing *Pokémon* titles almost exclusively for the past 16 years.

Developer History

Rhythm Hunter: HarmoKnight
2012 [Nintendo DS]

Pokémon Diamond and Pearl
2006 [Nintendo DS]

Pokémon Ruby and Sapphire
2002 [Game Boy Advance]

Pokémon Gold and Silver
1999 [Game Boy Color]

Pokémon Yellow
1998 [Game Boy Color]

Pokémon Red and Blue
1996 [Game Boy]

Mario & Yoshi
1991 [NES]

High Point

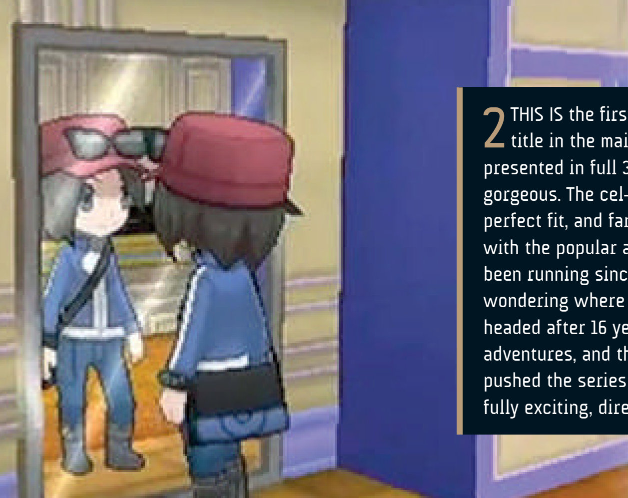
After venturing into deep grass alone, Professor Oak saves you, hands you your first Pokémon and sends you on your way to have one of all the greatest adventures of all time. Nothing can beat the feeling of flipping through that Pokédex for the first time, 149 silhouettes staring you back in the face, creating a desire for discovery.



4 WHAT WOULD a *Pokémon* game be without new monsters to maim and store in small magical cages? With the Pokédex well beyond the 649 mark, excuse us if we abandon the whole 'Gotta Catch 'Em All' mentality. Three new starter Pokémon look cute and all, but the trailer has a lot of familiar faces popping up throughout – could we be making a return to the Kanto region?

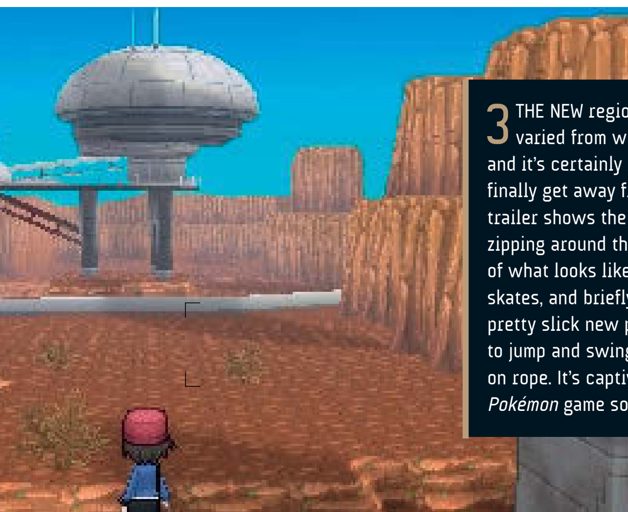


6 TOPPING THE Pokémon league is still the main priority for any budding trainer, so expect the eight gym badges to make a return. With myriad new features and increased system power at Game Freak's disposal, the gyms will almost certainly bend the mind with puzzles – we even got a brief look at one that simply materialises out of thin air!



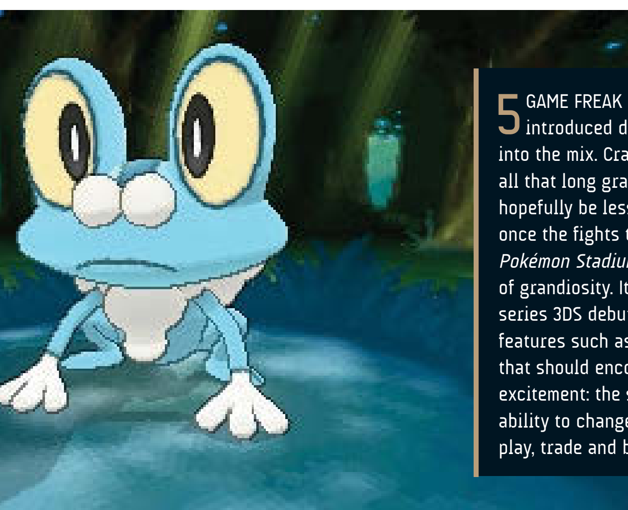
2 THIS IS the first *Pokémon* title in the main series to be presented in full 3D, and it looks gorgeous. The cel-shading is a perfect fit, and far more in line with the popular anime that's been running since 1997. We were wondering where *Pokémon* was headed after 16 years of top-down adventures, and the 3DS has pushed the series in a brand new, fully exciting, direction.





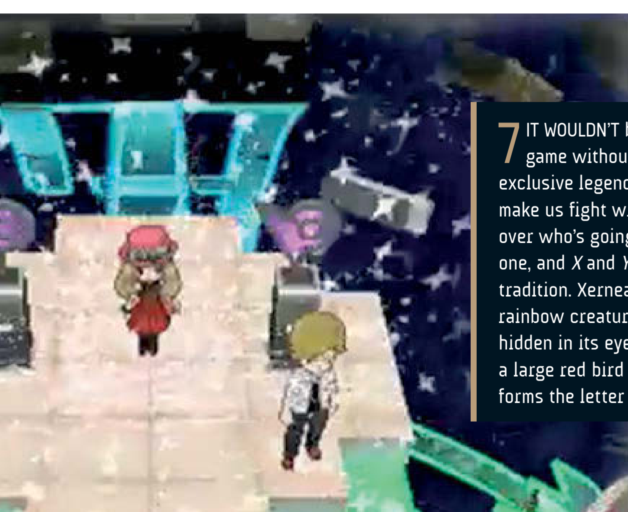
3 THE NEW region looks incredibly varied from what we've seen, and it's certainly refreshing to finally get away from Unova. The trailer shows the new trainer zipping around the cobbled streets of what looks like Paris on roller skates, and briefly using some pretty slick new platforming skills to jump and swing across gaps on rope. It's captivating to see a *Pokémon* game so fully animated.





5 GAME FREAK has finally introduced dynamic battles into the mix. Crawling through all that long grass will hopefully be less of a grind once the fights take on a *Pokémon Stadium*-esque level of grandiosity. It's how the series 3DS debut will utilise features such as StreetPass that should encourage excitement: the system has the ability to change the way we play, trade and battle.





7 IT WOULDN'T be a *Pokémon* game without version-exclusive legendary monsters to make us fight with our friends over who's going to buy which one, and *X* and *Y* follows the tradition. Xerneas, a deer-like rainbow creature, has an 'X' hidden in its eyes, while Yveltal is a large red bird whose wingspan forms the letter 'Y'.



Total War: Rome II

CONCEPT ■ Creative Assembly is giving you the opportunity to command the world's first superpower, because haven't you always wanted to lead the war machine through as many civilisations as you can discover?

We shall fight on the seas and oceans

The long-awaited sequel to *Rome: Total War* is marching slowly closer, and The Creative Assembly is determined to reclaim total dominance of the strategy genre. The Horsham-based studio is aware that great success hinges on expansion, and *Rome II* is noticeably grander in scale and production than its predecessor.

Total War's new battle engine is allowing Creative Assembly to do some wonderful things with war. The battlefields have grown to unbelievable sizes, with skirmishes being fought by thousands of soldiers at a time, though the detail hasn't suffered as a result. Pulling the camera to the ground enables you to see the bloodshed up close and personal, as the armies of Rome do battle with Carthaginians, Macedonians and five other not-yet-revealed factions. Simply put, even at this early stage *Rome II* is awe-inspiring to behold, a point that's drilled home when the spectacular naval-to-land battles get under way.

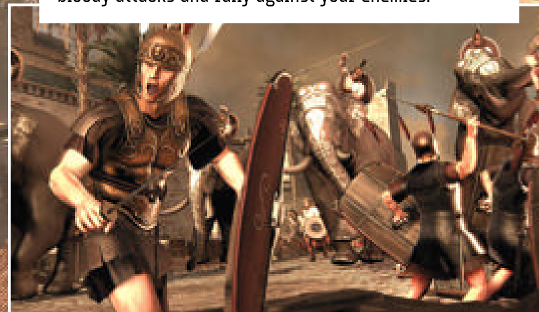
The decision path mechanic is also making a welcome return from *Shogun 2*, giving players even more options when trying to manage the political side to conquest. Shaping your empire through considered decisions will be a large component of the campaign, as key moments decide the fate of the Roman Republic.

It's been close to a decade since *Total War* treated us to combat on a scale we didn't think could exist, but Creative Assembly is giving us exactly what we want from our war games. Not the ability to control a simple battalion of units, nor the entire battle from a simple arbitrary map – we want to take control of a thousand men, get into the fray, and lead them to victory through the broken rubble and shattered steel. October can't come soon enough.



WAR IS HELL

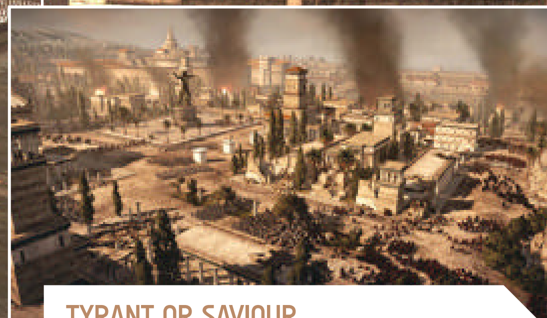
■ WHILE *ROME II* lets you sit back and view battles a thousand strong, you can also get your feet on the ground. This enables you to experience the horrors of sword-and-shield warfare, with your men dynamically reacting to the situations unfolding around them. They'll drag fallen allies to safety, flinch away from bloody attacks and rally against your enemies.





ON THE SEAS AND OCEANS

■ A FIRST for the series, battles can now transverse land and sea, making the scale of battles exponentially larger. Growing your naval presence is finally worthy of your resources, as ships can be used to simply move troops around the coastline or can assist sieges on cities with cannon fire.



TYRANT OR SAVIOUR

■ LETTING YOU take control of the world's first superpower is great and everything, but it's *Rome II*'s decision system that has us intrigued. It's been given a substantial upgrade since *Shogun*, with players able to plan their way to power diplomatically or use decisions to sway the favour of enemies and allies alike.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: UK
Publisher: Sega
Developer: The Creative Assembly
Release: October 2013
Players: 1-TBA

Developer Profile

Founded late in 1987, The Creative Assembly is a studio that started out porting games to DOS from Amiga and ZX Spectrum before moving on to revolutionise the modern strategy genre. *Total War: Shogun* sought to blend real-time tactics with turn-based gameplay, a stunt that proved to be the studio's breakthrough.

Developer History

Total War: Shogun 2 **2011 [PC]**
Viking Battle For Asgard **2008 [X360, PS3, PC]**
Rome: Total War **2004 [PC]**
Shogun: Total War **2000 [PC]**

High Point

While we always used to turn to *Dynasty Warriors* for large-scale battles, hooking up any iteration of *Total War* to a powerhouse PC and watching the battles unfold on an unprecedented scale is awe-inspiring.

HEADING TO THE NEXT GENERATION

TERMINAL VELOCITY IS moving *Survival Instinct* over to Nintendo's Wii U, and while we haven't seen any console-specific footage, the developer is promising to fully integrate the GamePad into the flow of play. It isn't making any sweeping changes, as the game had already been established before the Wii U came along, so the 'Pad will make accessing and managing your inventory easier, letting you use it at all times instead of having to drop off into a menu with a herd of Walkers on your tail. This does of course mean you can equip weapons and items in the heat of the moment, no doubt making the game faster and tenser than its Xbox and PlayStation cousins.

Above: Terminal Reality is promising that elements will be randomised throughout the game. So that shotgun you found in a locked room one playthrough may be teething with biters the next.





Above: Expect Daryl's crossbow to be your primary weapon throughout *Survival Instinct* – and with bolts in short supply, retrieving them from the heads of Walkers will be vital.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, Wii U
Origin: US
Publisher: Activision
Developer: Terminal Reality
Release: March 2013
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

Texas-based Terminal Reality was founded in 1994 by ex-Microsoft employee Mark Randall and former Mallard Software manager Brett Combs. The developer has had great success working on licensed properties such as *Ghostbusters* and *Kinect Star Wars*, but it has also made its fair share of innovative titles such as *Def Jam Rapster* and *4x4 Evolution*.

Penguin History

Kinect Star Wars
2012 [360]

Ghostbusters
2009 [Multi]

4x4 Evolution
2000 [Multi]

Terminal Velocity
1995 [PC]

High Point

Ghostbusters 3 probably isn't going to happen, and the *Ghostbusters* game has a lot to do with it. With the original cast resuming their roles, this fun but flawed entry is the closest thing we are going to get to some good ol' Ghostbusting for a very long time.

The Walking Dead: Survival Instinct

CONCEPT ■ The *Walking Dead* franchise continues to expand as Activision prepares to launch its FPS focused on the exploits of Daryl and Merle Dixon.

Are you ready to dive back into The Walking Dead?

For whatever reason it might be, culture has a morbid fascination with the undead. This isn't the first time zombies have dominated entertainment, but thanks to Robert Kirkman's cult comic-book series and its subsequent AMC adaption, *The Walking Dead* has becoming something of a cultural phenomenon. It was inevitable, then, that *The Walking Dead* would take a hold of videogames as well. Though, following the critical and commercial success of Telltale's episodic *Walking Dead* adventure, a first-person shooter probably wasn't what most fans had in mind.

The Walking Dead: Survival Instinct, the project led by Terminal Reality and Activision, has had a rough time since the turn of the New Year. Based on the wildly popular AMC television series, as opposed to the comics like its Telltale predecessor, *Survival Instinct* is putting players into the boots of Darrell and Merle Dixon – giving us the opportunity to experience their early adventures through Atlanta. Despite its planned March release date, both the developer and publisher have kept relatively shtum, only releasing a small batch of new screenshots to attempt damage control after a disgruntled fan tied early footage together and released it as the first 'official' trailer.

Early footage or not, *Survival Instinct* still had all of the grace of a decaying corpse. The models looked on par with a mid-tier PlayStation 2 title; the screen tearing and uninspired numbers of zombies didn't impress much either. With the developer still yet to release its own trailer to quell the tide of criticism, Terminal Reality is hinging on world of mouth from 'people in the know' to offer a respite for concerned fans.

Survival Instinct is at heart a survival stealth-action game, taking bigger cues from *ZombiU* than *Call Of Duty*. The developer assures us that a focus on stealth and carefully considered movements will take precedence over running gung-ho through a level.

/// For those worried this sounds like a simple cash-in on a popular licence, Terminal Reality is in fact incorporating some cool mechanics that should define it against the tide of FPSs. The undead, or Walkers as the comic has come to define them, will react to sight and sound – so using distractions like throwing bottles and flares is advised. Melee combat is also recommended, with ammo not only being scarce, but gunfire attracting unwanted attention. Like in the show, more than two or three Walkers will quickly overwhelm, and the last thing you want is a herd on your hands.

While typically in *The Walking Dead*, drafting survivors to your group usually leads to ruin, Terminal Reality is making it a big part of the gameplay. Found throughout the story, or tucked away hiding during missions, you will come across survivors who can join the group or simply be used as a resource to trade and gain new equipment.

Interestingly, survivors can be sent out on quests to find fuel, food and medical supplies. But with no guarantee they won't come back empty-handed – or worse, come back at all – you'll need to carefully consider what equipment you let them take out with them and whether their expertise matches the difficulty of the task at hand. It's these small micromanagement elements that will really distinguish the game from the many other first-person shooters on the market.

Terminal Reality has a great track record (we can forgive it for *Kinect Star Wars*), so we will give the developer the benefit of the doubt when it comes to that early footage. But when that's all it has shown off and with the game's release less than a month away, we can't help but be a little worried. Still, it sounds like the team has some great ideas and *The Walking Dead* – whether it be the comic book or television universe – is ripe for adaptation. With Telltale's sublime point-and-click still fresh in memory, and Season 3 of the TV series ready to make a highly anticipated return, Activision has its work cut out if it wants to get us pumped for yet another expansion of Kirkman's *Walking Dead* universe.

> "Authentic character design and frighteningly realistic animations"
> TERMINAL REALITY PRESS RELEASE





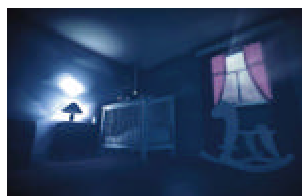
■ Above: Basing *Survival Instinct* on the TV show lets Activision explore new territory, with the Dixon brothers' adventure taking place while Rick is still in a coma.

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

AMONG THE SLEEP

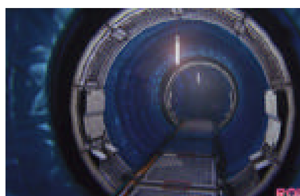
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Krillbite Studio**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2013**



A CHILD'S imagination can be a wonderful thing, but lucid creativity is often an enemy when you're alone in the dead of night. Exploring the realm straddling the real and surreal, *Among The Sleep* whisks you into the mind of a two-year-old child, exploring a world where mysterious creatures begin to fill the shadows as you make your first descent from the crib and into the house of horrors after bedtime.

ROUTINE

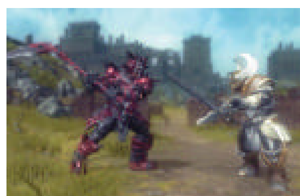
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Lunar Software**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2013**



ROUTINE LOOKS to be channelling the same sense of isolation as the *Alien* movie did in 1979, as you investigate the disappearance of the crew at a Moon base. *Routine* is a horror title at heart, with the feeling of being watched always apparent. Lunar Software is introducing *Rogue*-like elements into the design, with facets of the world randomised, permadeath around every corner and no traditional save system.

ASCEND: NEW GODS

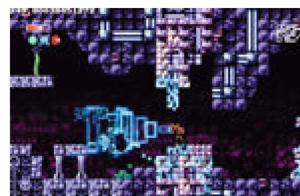
Format: **X360, PC**
Publisher: **Microsoft**
Developer: **Signal Studios**
ETA: **April 2013**



THE SCOPE of Xbox Live Arcade continues to expand, as Signal Studios prepares to launch its cross-platform RPG *Ascend: New Gods*. Players will need to pledge allegiance to one of the gods before being thrown into combat against mighty titans. Where *Ascend* will define itself, however, is its ability to let players fight across Xbox 360, PC and mobile platforms – making the fight for Caos even grander.

AXIOM VERGE

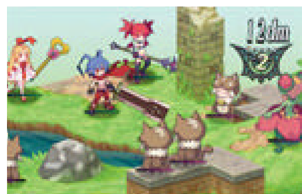
Format: **X360, PC**
Publisher: **Tom Happ**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2013**



AS THE indie scene has boomed, one thing we've happily seen a revival of is platform games from the *Metroid* school of influence. *Axiom Verge* looks wholly familiar in that respect, but arming you with a 'Glitch-gun' and asking you to literally break levels to progress and hunt for item upgrades is a fun way for one-man developer Tom Happ to make his game stand out on the crowded virtual shelves.

DISGAEA DIMENSION 2

Format: **PS3**
Publisher: **Nippon Ichi Software**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2013**



AS PART of Nippon Ichi Software's 20th anniversary, another instalment of the much-loved *Disgaea* franchise is on the way. Following on from 2004's *Heart Of Darkness*, expect the series' trademark strategic combat to return – as well as a host of returning and new characters. This has been a long time coming; here's hoping Nippon Ichi can still capture the magic it found with these characters all those years ago.

AMNESIA: A MACHINE FOR PIGS

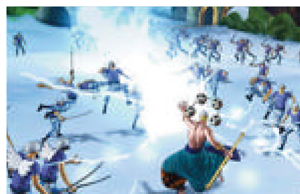
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Frictional Games**
Developer: **thechineseroom**
ETA: **2013**



AMNESIA: THE Dark Descent was a breath of fresh air for the long-stagnating horror genre in videogames, so to say its follow-up *A Machine For Pigs* is highly anticipated is a bit of an understatement. Taking us to a new time period, developer thechineseroom is making some major modifications to the level design and combat, though we hope the reliance on shadows and the insanity meter make a return.

ONE PIECE: KAIZOKU MUSOU 2

Format: **PS3, PSVita**
Publisher: **Temco Koei**
Developer: **Namco Bandai Games**
ETA: **TBA**



IN ONE of the more unlikely coming togethers of franchises, the combination of *One Piece* with *Dynasty Warriors* did incredibly well for Namco Bandai. So unsurprisingly, it is ramping everything up for the sequel. Promising an exploration of older story arcs, along with an expansion with the scales of battle, *Kaizoku Musou 2* is coming along nicely.

LEGO CITY UNDERCOVER

Format: **Wii U**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **TT Games**
ETA: **March 2013**

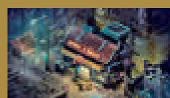


LEGO CITY Undercover has a lot going for it. It is developer Traveller's Tales' first attempt to create a Lego game outside of an existing IP – instead based on a popular line of the Lego toys themselves – and it couldn't be shaping up better. Boasting a massive open world where you take on the role of a cop stopping bad guys, think inverted *GTA* – but, y'know, made of Lego.



DELAYED – Sniper Ghost Warrior 2 (Multi)

It's had a rough development cycle, but it looks like *Sniper Ghost Warrior 2* finally has a firm release date. Expect to don your ghillie suit this March. Hopefully City Interactive has used the extra development time productively.

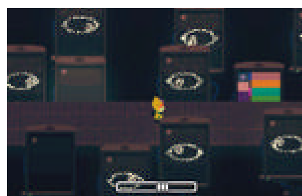


DELAYED – Shadowrun Returns (PC, Mac, iOS)

We've been excited about this one since it soared past its Kickstarter target in record time back in March 2012, but we'll have to wait a little longer as Harebrained Schemes has delayed the title till April to add some extra polish.

RADIO THE UNIVERSE

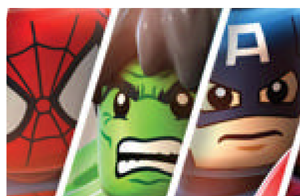
Format: **PC**
Publisher: **6e6e6e**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2013**



RADIO THE Universe soared through the funding stage on Kickstarter, and for good reason. This ambitious new 2D action RPG looks gorgeous, with the sci-fi aesthetic lending itself perfectly to the subversive story. The combat structure looks interesting, too, rewarding players for taking a strategically defensive approach to the environments littered with all manner of nightmarish horrors.

LEGO: MARVEL SUPER HEROES

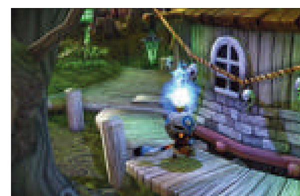
Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Warner Bros.**
Developer: **TT Games**
ETA: **2013**



ONE OF the bigger surprises to come so far this year, Marvel are teaming up with Travellers Tales to bring the House Of Ideas to life in glorious Lego form. The full roster of Avengers (and Deadpool, obviously) looks to be involved as Earth's Mightiest Heroes must prepare to fight Galactus: Devourer of Worlds and Loki, again. We are surprised to see Marvel team up with Warner (owners of DC), but we are

THE WITCH AND THE HUNDRED KNIGHTS

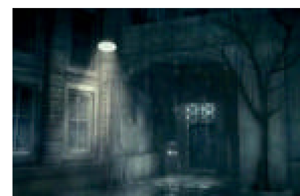
Format: **PS3**
Publisher: **NIS America**
Developer: **Nippon Ichi Software**
ETA: **2013**



NIPPON ICHI Software's long awaited action RPG is almost here after a slew of delays, and the studio – probably best known for the *Disgaea* series of tactical RPGs – really has our interest piqued with this PlayStation 3 exclusive. The combat in particular looks absolutely nuts, with the player able to send in 99 other characters to swarm the battlefield while running wild with hack-and-slash sensibilities.

RAIN

Format: **PS3**
Publisher: **Sony Japan Studio**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **TBA**



RAIN HAD us hooked immediately. While little has been shown, *Rain* is Sony's Japan Studio once again looking to break convention with a quirky atmospheric puzzler. It centres on a little boy who wakes up in a mysterious new world and is completely invisible. He can only be seen as an outline in the constantly pouring rain, with the game focused on exploration of a hidden world.

TINY BARBARIAN DX

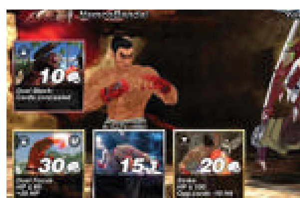
Format: **PC, Mac**
Publisher: **StarQuail**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **April 2013**



THIS IS another Kickstarter campaign that was too awesome to not throw all of our money at. Inspired by fantasy pulp stories and Conan, *Tiny Barbarian* has a retro aesthetic, fun addictive combat and the sort of style and swagger that just begs for multiple replays. The game was once available for free, but StarQuail has completely revamped it and we can't wait to see the full extent of the improvements.

TEKKEN CARD TOURNAMENT

Format: **iOS, Android, Web**
Publisher: **Namco Bandai**
Developer: **In-House**
ETA: **March 2013**



TEKKEN CARD Tournament looks set to integrate Namco's pedigree of fighting games with Bandai's history with trading cards in this interesting new free to play card battling game featuring the Tekken roster for mobile and tablet devices. The studio is also releasing physical cards that you can scan into the game with a QR code – excuse us while we continue to lament the loss of Eye of Judgement.

MUGEN SOULS Z

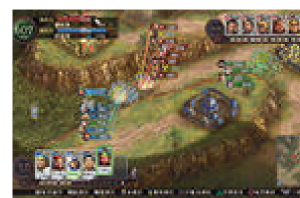
Format: **PS3**
Publisher: **Compile Heart**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2013**



COMPILE HEART isn't wasting any time: *Mugen Souls* may have only been on shelves for less than a year, but the sequel is already on the way in the popular 'overwhelming' series. Framed around a young girl who seeks to conquer the universe by uniting parallel worlds, it's certainly a fun concept, but hopefully the game will feature less censorship than its predecessor this time around.

ROMANCE OF THE THREE KINGDOMS XII

Format: **PSVita**
Publisher: **Temco Koei**
Developer: **In-house**
ETA: **2013**



ROMANCE OF The Three Kingdoms has struggled to recapture its form as of late, but this port of the 2012 release should quell much of the disdain thrown in its direction. The Vita's touch pad is being utilised to add a new level of control to the strategic battlefield and if you happen to know anyone with the PS3 version, you can also join together for some cross-platform multiplayer.

TOMB RAIDER

A SURVIVOR IS BORN

Experience the intense origin story of Lara Croft and her ascent from a frightened young woman to a hardened survivor.



A TURNING POINT
Lara is reborn as a modern action heroine whose character arc has only just begun.



FIGHT TO LIVE
Lara must use every ounce of physical and mental fortitude to overcome impossible odds on Yamatai.



ALL-NEW RAIDING EXPERIENCE
Visceral combat, dynamic traversal, environment puzzles, and tombs to explore.

COMING MARCH 5



PRE-ORDER NOW FROM

GAME
IT'S NEVER JUST A GAME

TO RECEIVE THE

EXPLORER PACK

 **CHALLENGE TOMB**  + **CLIMBING SKILLS** 



PROVISIONAL



 XBOX 360 







"It has an amazing amount of content, it's cute, funny and goofy, and it takes its gameplay very seriously"

TORE BLYSTAD, IO INTERACTIVE









WHY I ❤...

Super Mario Galaxy

TORE BLYSTAD, IO INTERACTIVE

“*I grew up on Commodore 64 and Amiga games and was only exposed to the world of Nintendo at the age of 18. I was a fan of games like* Shadow Of The Beast *and* Barbarian *so* Super Mario World *did seem a little childish, but after trying it I was immediately sucked into the Mushroom Kingdom by the tight gameplay and playful charm and I've been a big Nintendo fan ever since.*

My favourite game has to be Super Mario Galaxy *– for me it is the most inspired Mario game in a decade. It has an amazing amount of content, it's cute, funny and goofy, and it takes its gameplay very seriously. Few other studios in the world can deliver the kind of diversity and finesse to its mechanics and features, and the integration of software and hardware is second to none. To me,* Super Mario Galaxy *is pretty much a perfect game.*”

THE NEXT-GEN COUNTDOWN

The clock is ticking – but is it for a rebirth for the next-gen consoles or for the start of a new type of console gaming?





We have to admit, there have been worse kept secrets in history. The world not being flat. Dropping nuclear bombs on civilian targets not being a wonderful idea. King Ludwig the Mad being… well, mad. In terms of hyperbole though, the eventual reveal of the next Microsoft and PlayStation consoles ranks up there.

We all know it's coming this year because there are more leaks than a swimming pool built from sieves. We've had codenames galore thrown at us – Durango, Orbis, Kryptos, Thebes, Oban, Infinity… While we've been writing this, more and more information has been coming out.

Things are going so fast that it's entirely possible that, by the time you're reading this, one or both of the big console announcements will have happened. (We're betting that they'll hold off until GDC at the earliest, but one may try to gazump the other by announcing as early as March.)

But what exactly do we know about the next iteration of consoles? Beneath the hearsay and speculation, games™ investigates the next generation of gaming.

THE CONSOLE WAR:
How Microsoft and Sony face off in the next gen

Let's start with the Xbox Next – aka 720 or Durango – which we have much more information on (indicating, among other things, that development is further down the line).

The first thing that's set to change is that the Kinect will be integrated with the system. It'll support native 1080p 3D video and work with SmartGlass and the recently released Xbox mobile apps. The major possible innovation, and one that Google is also chasing, is augmented reality glasses. In 2010 design documents leaked last year, Microsoft's Fortaleza innovation lab was reported to be working on these for release later in the 720's life cycle. We suspect that these are tied into the IllumiRoom technology Microsoft recently announced, which projects wide-angle images from the game you're playing around your television; we'll find more about that in April. The latest leaks also point at it having HDMI output *and* input. We have no idea what it would need the latter for, but it points to it acting as a TVR or having a top-end HD camera.

The console itself is predicted (mainly from the scarily accurate tech consultancy SemiAccurate) to have eight AMD x86 CPU cores (rumoured to be running at just 1.6GHz, half the 360's 3.2GHz), 8GB of DDR3 RAM and a recent graphics chip (GPU), based on the HD7000 series of AMD graphics cards. The rumours also have that GPU having 32GB of fast ESRAM, which it can share with other processes

> "Both Microsoft and Sony made big losses on the last generation – with Microsoft's topping $8bn and Sony's hitting around $3.5bn"

if necessary. It also comes with a Blu-ray player (though later versions will probably skip the optical drive, as it becomes increasingly redundant) and 500GB of storage.

The rumours have it set for a September 2013 release date – but that may shift two months either way, depending on how well manufacturing the Oban chips is going (November is the other mooted release date). Given current rumours of it going well, the 720 likely went into production on the last day of 2012. The price point is supposedly $299-399.

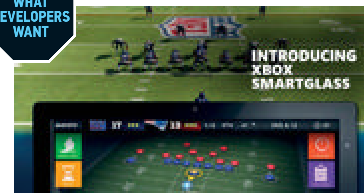
Meanwhile the PS4 aka Orbis will also have an AMD CPU and GPU, making it another PC in console clothing. The Orbis dev kits have 256GB of storage and 8 or 16GB of RAM, but it's said that the eventual console will only have 4GB. The price point is supposedly $399+.

The CPU will run at the same 1.6GHz, but the GPU was rumoured to be the HD 6670, which can run the most taxing 1080p PC games at around 30fps – but other rumours had it as an HD7000 series. More recent leaks, as we went to press, had it running 18 Radeon GCN compute units at 800MHz – 50% more than the Durango/720.

Despite this rather normal setup (after the frankly bizarre Cell), Sony is apparently still experimenting with really weird processor and memory architecture; if it goes for it and pulls it off, the PS4 could be significantly more powerful than the 720. If it fails, it could end up with another disappointing Cell. All we know at the moment is that the mooted CPU (either the A8-3850 or an A10 model) has a slightly dated APU on it, a secondary chip that can work with the GPU to boost its power, meaning it should operate faster than the 30fps at 1080p we mentioned above.

There's no word yet on what innovations the PS4 will make in terms of inputs; like the 720, Sony would be mad to abandon the gamepad, so its innovations will happen elsewhere. As we discuss later, there are hundreds of peripherals, for both inputs

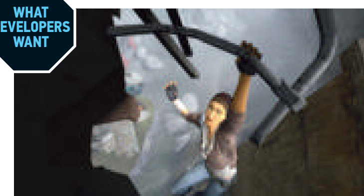
WHAT DEVELOPERS WANT



MOBILE INTEGRATION

■ I'M JUST curious to see how they do integration with something more global. Already Microsoft is doing it with SmartGlass and how they will create that environment... that we'll have the freedom to incorporate some more parts than just the console. Say a location-based element or to use a tablet with the console... Not just be a console that is living room based, but global for the players.
Alexandre Breault, lead game designer on multiplayer, Eidos Montreal

WHAT DEVELOPERS WANT



GREAT GAMES

■ THE ONLY tech I want to see [is] a PC that people can hook up to their TVs with ease that has a fully downloadable library of GOOD GAMES... Consoles need to get over this peripheral fad and put the focus back on investing in exciting and innovative GAMES, not wands that emulate a controller in ways that appear new and exciting. New consoles need to focus on the only thing that is important... Make it easy to buy games, download games, play games and play online with friends...
Edmund McMillen, creator of *Super Meatboy*

WHAT DEVELOPERS WANT



CHEAP CONSOLES!

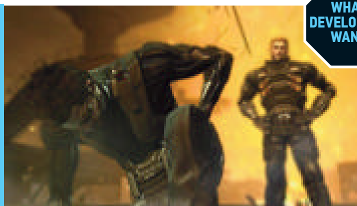
■ WITH MY consumer hat on, I would also like new consoles to be competitively priced. I do think that the PS3 suffered because of its high price initially. It would be great if the next generation were a bit cheaper, as I'm sure to be buying one at launch!
Chris Doran, CEO of Geomerics



PC FREEDOM

■ I DON'T want to have to buy discs – downloadable games on day of release would be lovely. I want a mix of curated content and more esoteric indie stuff given a chance to find an audience. I want far [more open] systems supporting more innovative use of multiplayer and online models. Essentially, I want the freedoms of a PC with the curation and specificity of console hardware.

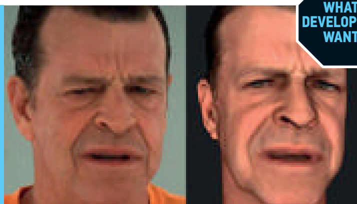
Mike Bithell, creator of Indie hit *Thomas Was Alone*



MORE MEMORY

■ LOTS OF RAM. More memory means more objects, more things to do; it's everything. With every game, it's always pushing as hard you can, optimising the best you can, but you always want more space. The wrestling match at the end of it is always making everything fit; how do you get everything in there and still fit in the memory budget.

Jason Dozois, Lead Level Designer, Eidos



FACES

■ INCREASES IN support for higher-res geometry, higher-res textures and more complex shading calculations will significantly raise the bar on what is possible in next-gen development… We [work] on some of the most photoreal characters ever created in the film space. Next-gen consoles will now be closer to being able to support these high-fidelity characters in a runtime environment.

Peter Busch, VP of Business Development, FaceWare

and outputs, that it could snap up. Sony has already snapped up game-streaming firm Gaikai, so we have a good idea how it is planning to get games onto the system – and from what developers have seen of the interface, it's been substantially redesigned to be more user-friendly. (We're just hoping that there are no more half-hour waits for installs and software updates.)

So which is more powerful? According to news site VG247, the PS4 has been benchmarked at 1.84 teraflops, with the 720 at only 1.23 teraflops. As a point of reference, the Samaritan Unreal 4 tech demo was claimed to need 2.5 teraflops to run. Yet these numbers are misleading, as they only measure one element of a system's power (mainly the GPU), with RAM and HD speeds as important. If, as is rumoured, the two systems share the same GPU, then they may well function along very similar lines – and neither of them will be able to support 4K resolutions or compete with current top-end PCs. Indeed, those CPUs are designed for basic-level laptops.

So, we have a vague idea of the architecture of the next generation of consoles. Yet there are big changes on the horizon. Both Microsoft and Sony made big losses on the last generation – with





CASH UP FRONT

■ I WOULD [make games for the new consoles] if someone said to me 'here we'll pay you too.' It all comes down to that. It's all well and fine to be an artist… making something original, unique and that scratches your creative interests. But it's a business. And with the opportunities in a business it's either got to make a profit or be highly strategic. It won't do you much good if you make a profit, but miss out on strategy; strategic placement for the future so that you're well-placed when things turn and change. You're going to go out of business fast. We're making a giant play strategically right now, to get into a whole new kind of business and realign ourselves with our customers in a way that's so much more interesting and relevant. So you're going to see people putting products on these new consoles that are low cost, low risk and not deeply innovative, with very shallow development times, to mitigate those development risks. People will get a sniff of that and say 'I want something original and fun'. People are really begging for it. That's why we decided to go with *Wildman*, instead of something more incremental and derivative… we know it's new to bring something that pushes boundaries and isn't a safe bet.

Chris Taylor, Gas-Powered Games

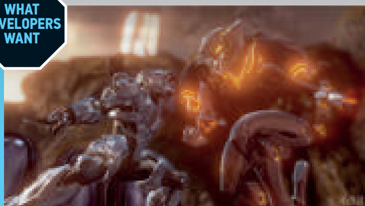
"If, as is rumoured, the two systems share the same GPU, then they may well function along very similar lines"

Microsoft's topping $8bn and Sony's hitting around $3.5bn. The mid-size publishers that grew fat on the consoles are fading – Midway, THQ, and Acclaim are dead and we think that there will be more consolidation and cost-cutting among the smaller publishers. The high-street stores that sold the physical products are dying – Currys shut half its shops in 2008, HMV is dead, and GAME is a zombie.

There's a range of independent developers and veterans who are united in their call for changes in the console systems. And there are new Android-based consoles that are challenging the established platform creators.

So, now we've talked about the old world, we're going to look at the new world. We'll look at what developers want from the new consoles – from Sony, Microsoft, Valve or whoever. We'll look at those new consoles themselves, from the unlikeliest of sources. And we'll look at how weird they might be.





BETTER AI

■ IF WE can have a lot of code that permits us to have a lot more complex AI behaviour tree in the next gen, I'd be able to create more and more realistic behaviour, where you can tell a story much more dynamically than it being all scripted... We know that when a player is playing, he makes a lot of millisecond decisions and the branching in his brain... is very complex... An AI could react to all these possibilities. The processing power is the hard limit. [We need] something with more power, that will allow more complex behaviour states... A lot of people are building AI libraries, but the more we advance, the more the AI becomes complex and the libraries complexify themselves... In the case of *Tomb Raider*, we have self-preservation components, we have them navigating an organic environment, which is a very complex algorithm. Normally, the AI only sees geometry, steep angles, but people don't know that. Right now we're limited to free decision-making in advance; but having an AI adapting himself to your tactics. An AI that can simulate emotions is much more complex. I don't think we're there yet, but I'd like that to be in the next generation.

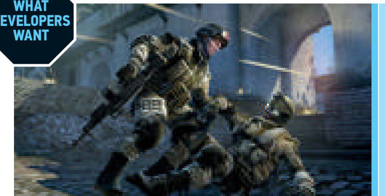
Daniel Bisson, Game Director, Crystal Dynamics



BETTER COMMUNICATION

■ DEFINITELY COMMUNICATION between players. Multiplayer gameplay is much more rewarding when you have a chance to talk, to show off your score, or communicating what type of experience that you prefer... It would be fantastic to have better tools to communicate your progress and your experience... Having done this multiplayer *Tomb Raider*, we've bonded as a team because of the experience we've had playing together. For us, it's talking about the game afterwards. How do we bring the LAN party atmosphere to a person who plays by himself? Not necessarily stuffing a camera onto the console, but I remember playing *Halo* LAN parties at school. I can still remember certain events and that was ten years ago. How do we bring that?

Joe Khoury, Eidos Montreal



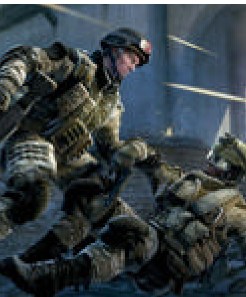
NO PUBLISHERS, BETTER UPDATES,

■ THE NEXT generation of consoles needs a significant lowering of the walls around the gardens... Consoles seriously lag the service-oriented nature of games today. Updating a game on a console is a miserable and expensive process. Developers need the opportunity to patch a game daily... Robust platforms for user-generated content? Not consoles. There is very little flexibility in revenue models... Got a great free-to-play game on PC that would be fun to play on console? Not going to happen today. Relative to console gaming today, the innovation is happening on the PC because the developer can take their new ideas directly to the player. Quickly. Without massive inconvenience... The consoles should be seeing just as many unique new games. But it's going to take tearing down barriers on consoles that, today, are holding the industry back.

Patrick Hudson, President of Robot Entertainment, creators of *Orcs Must Die*

PLAYING THE NEXT-GEN

5 THINGS THAT WILL CHANGE



DEVELOPERS WILL PUBLISH THEIR OWN GAMES

THIS ALREADY happens on PC, as Patrick Hudson of Robot Entertainment says: "On consoles, having a publisher is mandatory. Even for a rather small digital title. That creates a separation between the customer and the developer. It takes significant marketing control away from the developer. Even something as fundamental as setting pricing is put in the publisher's hands. Contrast this to distribution on Steam. We can go direct to the customer. We own the marketing message. We build the community. We set the price and discount when appropriate. We can get the community involved in building new content. And, ultimately, the players choose which games are worth the price. Those are fundamentally different businesses from a developer's perspective."



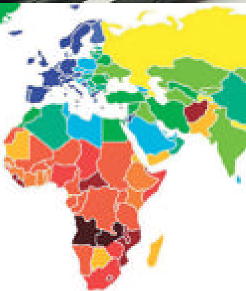
BOXED PRODUCTS ARE DEAD

IF YOU walk down a British high street these days it's got the air of a hospice about it. Jessops, Woolworth's, Comet, Habitat, JJB Sports, Virgin Megastore, HMV, Barratts, Oddbins… they've all gone. This is partially because of a now closed tax loophole for retailers (base yourself in Jersey and the customer would pay no VAT, even if all of your sales and stock were in the UK) and partially because everyone's moving to digital retail anyway. Why have a DVD taking up shelf space when you can rent the digital version and stream it? Why settle for the limited display stock of a shoe store when you can buy, try and return for free online? For games, where this is no necessity for a physical product, only Collector's Editions will survive this cull – and publishers may realise that it's more profitable to just sell the extra goodies separately, as in-game purchases.



GAME PRICES MAY DROP

TIED INTO the boxed product changes, a whole layer of distributors, manufacturers, marketing and brand people will vanish, taking their cost with them. Indie games like *Minecraft* and *Trials: Evolution* show that you don't need all those people. To promote their games, developers will reach out to their communities and, to a lesser extent, the press and social media figureheads like TotalBiscuit. Of course, this is relying on the console manufacturers emulating the Apple and Steam models and letting developers set their own price points. Of the 2,000 games on Steam, most are less than £20 and many are less than £5. Most games on iOS are £0.69 or free, because the market is highly competitive.



RELEASE DATES WILL UNIFY

DUKE NUKEM Forever was released in the US a week before the UK. This was almost certainly for localisation reasons. The team will have been tweaking the game right up to their final deadline, which means the localisation teams need to check everything over. (Of course, in the UK we mostly speak English, but we're typically bundled in with Europe for release dates – and they need translation time). But *Duke Nukem* is also a sign of why publishers will want to get rid of the release date gap. The game released in the US, to an immediate panning – but some people had already bought it, so it sold a passable 100,000. By the time the game came out in the UK, even though it had been patched to fix many bugs, it was a dead duck. It sold just 11,000. Without that gap and the warning, many more UK purchasers may have picked it up.



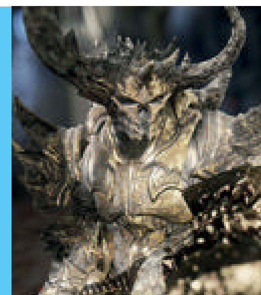
FREE CONTENT WILL BOOM

WE'VE ALREADY seen on the iOS devices that the huge number of games drove prices down to zero; that's basic microeconomics. But the resulting free-to-play model has also worked on MMOs, most of which also make their money from microtransactions. Similarly, on Steam, companies like Tripwire make their money by giving away DLC for *Red Orchestra* for free – encouraging players to buy their game, as it's endlessly updating – the same model *Team Fortress 2* uses. We predict that, to give their games a bigger edge and a longer lifespan, console developers will release more free DLC – assuming it's free for them and the platform-holders loosen their grip on download controls.

Gaming is set to change over the next few years, but there are some traditions that will remain. Here's how the industry will evolve in the next generation

5 THINGS THAT WILL STAY THE SAME

1080P WILL STILL BE THE NORM



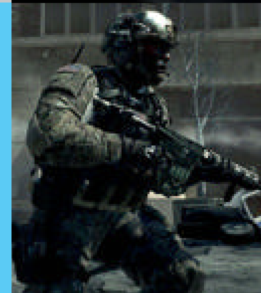
AT THE start of the Xbox 360's life cycle, most users were still using CRT televisions. It's likely that some still do, especially as the price has dropped. But the price of a 1080p TV or monitor has also dropped to an affordable level, so will the consoles go further? No. The next step up, according to tech guys, is 4K and then 8K. But these simply aren't plausible now. 4K has four times the pixels of 1080p, meaning that, even if it's supported, it's likely the consoles won't have the power to run it. They would upscale most content (in the way that early 360 games ran at 480p rather than 720p). On top of that it requires a huge amount of additional storage (more than Blu-ray offers) and download times will go through the roof.

THE GAMEPAD WILL STILL BE KING



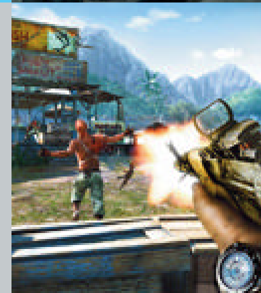
WE'VE SEEN a bunch of new ideas for input arrive over the last generation – from the motion sticks of the Wii and PS3 to the arm-waving and shouting of the Kinect – but fundamentally nothing offers the accessibility and playability of the well-established gamepad. Sure, the mouse and keyboard is better for slower, more precise, gameplay – especially on high-resolution screens – but as we saw elsewhere, 4K and 8K tech is a way off for the current generation of consoles and without those you can't see details clearly enough from the sofa. We expect that both the PS4 and Xbox 720 will ship with gamepads – though they will include an alternate input. All the upcoming Android consoles include gamepads – hell, the Nvidia Project Shield is built around a gamepad.

TRIPLE-A GAMES WILL GET MORE EXPENSIVE



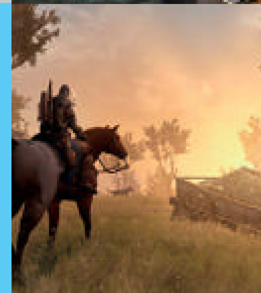
WITH THE potential of higher resolutions and more memory, developers can spend more time polishing the look of their games. Think how big studios are getting because of the demands of systems' graphics – it's not unheard of to have 300 plus developers working on a given game. As the teams get bigger, you need more expensive producers and managers to keep everything going and together. The next-gen Unreal 4 engine is claimed to make development easier – but in the past, new engines and bizarre console architecture like the Cell has only increased development times. Add in the new Android consoles, tablet PCs, iOS devices and the Wii U, which some publishers will want to develop for, and dev times may get even longer.

PC GAMES LOOK BETTER THAN CONSOLE GAMES



AT THE moment, PC games look so much better than console ones it's ridiculous, but publishers aren't supporting them as well as they should. Multiplatform games suffer from the console memory issues, restraining how beautiful they can be on PC. Modders do much of the work making PC games beautiful; for example, Namco Bandai claimed it wasn't possible to include hi-res graphics and framerate fixes on *Dark Souls* – but they were unlocked and fixed by a modder 23 minutes after the game's release. Even a mid-range PC's resolution and tech makes games look amazing in comparison to the 360. The new generation will unlock that: higher-resolution textures and higher-polygon models will work on console too, so developers will actually make them, leaving the modders free to fix the inevitable bugs. Yet only PCs will support 4K and 8K.

SEQUELITIS WON'T GO AWAY



MARIO HAS appeared in over 200 games, selling over 210 million copies. That's the reason publishers stick with franchises; to have average sales of over one million every time a brand is used. So the big triple-A franchises will continue. If you spend $100 million marketing a title, you only need spend a fraction of that again to maintain the brand recognition. And you dare not vary the mechanics, else you'll lose the vocal fanboys. The indie titles, which will become increasingly popular and dominant throughout this gen, aren't quite so tied to sequels, because they value metrics less than they do innovation and keeping themselves excited. Being constrained by a previous title's mechanics and ideas is a hard limit.

















THE TECHNOLOGY OF THE NEXT GENERATION

This cutting-edge technology might never make it into our homes, but it has the power to shape the future

Chris Taylor, founder of *Supreme Commander* developer Gas Powered Games, is scathing of the current tech: "Those consoles are the walled garden. Proprietary, pay for this, pay for that, approval process, licensing and so on. They've got so much red tape and all those costs are passed onto the customer in the price of the game. The customer's not buying a game, he's buying a whole lot of things that aren't interesting to [him]. When I see what Valve's doing with Linux, the different hardware vendors will come to the table and drive the price of hardware down. It'll start at some ridiculous number and go down and down and down, and the games that I bought ten years ago will still run... all the wonderful things that come from having a game on a cloud that I own and can download... that model is going to put so much pressure on consoles that it's not even funny. We all feel the air crackle a bit with the Ouya and Nvidia and Steam that... something's going to CHANGE."

As Taylor indicated, it's never been easier than now to make a games machine. When Google bought the Android operating system back in 2005, the firm made it completely open source, meaning that anyone can use it to build a machine. Given that it's got built-in marketplaces already in place, anyone with access to an Asian manufacturing plant, a knowledgeable designer and enough capital can knock out Android devices, without paying Google a cent. It's not surprising that Android is now the biggest smartphone provider in the world, with 500,000 phones out there.

It's also not surprising that, as time passed by since the PlayStation 3's launch, the public's standard of what constituted a 'cutting-edge' game was increasingly defined by the stagnant console technology. This meant that technology prices came down and down and hardware manufacturers just let the cutting edge cruise, rather than pushing it along. The focus became on making the technology cheap and power-efficient, rather than cramming as much power in. So technology became smaller, cooler and lighter, which segued nicely into the generations of smartphones – do please remember that the first iPhone was released a mere six years ago, in 2007. And the smartphones pushed the technology, because they became the most lucrative hardware market.

So what we're dealing with today is extremely cheap smartphone technology derived from PC technology. This is exactly the stuff that can be used to make a huge variety of new consoles, very cheaply, that are more powerful than the PS3 and Xbox 360. And suddenly all these small technology companies, that have made their

> "We all feel the air crackle a bit with the Ouya and Nvidia and Steam that... something's going to CHANGE" – Chris Taylor

money in places other than consoles, are looking at the market with wide-eyed optimism – opting to construct their own hardware that pushes the market in their direction without the risk of going bankrupt if it fails. In fact, thanks to Kickstarter and other crowdfunding models, they can see if anyone wants the console before they've done anything but cost it up and make an early prototype.

The first of these Android-based consoles to do that was the Ouya, made by a bunch of techie developers, an IGN digital distribution higher-up and the famed industrial designer Yves Béhar. The concept of the console, much like David Braben's well-intentioned Raspberry Pi, was for a super-cheap device that fills the role of modern consoles at a fraction of the price. All the games are free-to-try, and it's gained support from the developers of *Minecraft*, *Canabalt*, *Wasteland* and other indie luminaries. For developers and modders, the hardware is standardised and easy to hack (without voiding your warranty), and every unit can act as a debug.

Launching on Kickstarter in 2012, the Ouya quickly gained traction and rapidly made over eight times its original million-dollar target in donations. The cheap hardware and free games, with easy TV connectivity, made it an essential purchase for early adopters and nerds with too much disposable income and not enough predilection for charitable giving. It also acts as a solid, cheap testing platform for developers who want to try out their games on Android – its only flaw is a lack of access to the Google Play Store. As we write this, the developer units have started landing on desks all around the world.

Xi3 Piston

Though this is similar to the Steam Box, Piston is innovative in its own way. It's a truly modular micro-PC that fits in your hand, with modular components making it easily upgradeable. It's also absolutely tiny, packed with connectivity and beautiful to look at.



It's notable how influential Kickstarter has been in this revolution, for this was only one of three projects we're going to mention here that's been financed through Kickstarter. Kickstarter proved to companies that their initial capital outlay was worthwhile, several times over. It's worth talking quickly here about the GameStick, another Android console that's even smaller than the Ouya – but much weaker in specifications. That's because the entire console, from HDMI port to storage to RAM to processor, is inside a thumbdrive, which tucks away neatly inside the Bluetooth controller. Because of its tiny size it only has 8GB of storage, so most of its games are stored in the cloud. And if you don't fancy using the bundled controller (which is a little bit like a Game & Watch), you can use mobile phones and other Bluetooth gamepads as controllers.

Of course, getting something funded is much harder than actually building it. You have to deal with companies in places like China, where contracts are sometimes less well respected. So how is PlayJam ensuring quality and timeliness? "It started 12 months ago with a few sketches on the back of an envelope, as we know the TV gaming space extremely well," says PlayJam's Anthony Johnson. "We asked ourselves the question: what if we controlled the hardware too? We then approached an R&D company with significant experience in the mobile space in South Korea who were able to design the concept and selected manufacturing partners in China who have worked with top-flight names in the industry."

Like Chris Taylor, PlayJam thought that the consoles are too hard to get games on. "Core gamers will always be happy to invest in high end hardware," says Johnson. "Their expectations will always be that the next generation of traditional console will be better than the last. This poses a huge financial strain on the traditional console manufacturers. It is estimated that the PS4 will cost $1,000 per unit to build, requiring them to sell over 130 million units to be successful. When you add to this the Hollywood-like production costs of some of the bigger titles, you begin to see cracks appearing in the model. GameStick turns this model on its head. We believe open platforms are the way forward. We also have support from developers who have traditionally built for the larger console manufacturers who feel the terms are far too restrictive and onerous. Sure, the gameplay is a very different proposition today, but devices such as GameStick offer a bottom-up solution which is extremely scalable and we think will inspire a new wave of innovation."

GameStick

PlayJam is a small developer with large ambitions. The GameStick is an ultra-portable Android console – basically a controller with a tucked-away 'thumbdrive'. With its HDMI output, it plugs straight into a TV and works with any Bluetooth controller. It'll retail at $79.



One company which isn't going the Kickstarter route is Nvidia, the chip-maker that invented the GPU, though it still using the Android platform for its device. Jason Paul, the company's director of GeForce gaming, laughs when we ask about Kickstarter. "We're a little bit past the Kickstarter stage of our company… this is a good investment for us too. From building Tegra 4 as a processor… to building the streaming tech is a really large investment… this is beyond a Kickstarter investment, that we've put into this project."

The project in question is Project Shield, which Nvidia wowed us with at CES earlier in the year. This idea reflects three things: first, the firm wants an independent third-party platform like Android that's not subject to a single platform-holder's whims, since both Sony and Microsoft have gone with Nvidia's great rivals AMD/ATI for all the processors in both

consoles. Second, it wants gamers to keep using their PCs and to have a reason to invest in the latest GeForce graphics cards. Third, that gamers should be able to get access to triple-A games wherever they are, and play them on whatever convenient display happens to be nearby.

"Everyone's carrying a cell [phone], buying tablets, so there's lots of opportunity in dedicated mobile gaming devices." Paul tells games™. "Some people dubbed 2012 as the year of PC gaming and you have a strong Android platform, which both create an opportunity for a mobile gaming device that is based off of open platforms and not on the closed console ecosystem. We saw these trends and thought it would be an awesome opportunity to build a mobile gaming system that allows gamers to play any games they want, Android or PC, anytime, anywhere."

So Project Shield is an Android-based mobile platform, shaped like a classic 360 gamepad, with a clamshell lid that includes a small 720p HD touch screen and powerful speakers. "Of course, you have access to the complete Google Play library with hundreds of thousands of games, and the device supports touch, so you can play any touch-based game on the device as well." says Paul. "Our goal with our Tegrazone store is really to curate and show the best for Project Shield; if they want the other games, they can go to Google Play." Inside the pad, however, is the latest Tegra 4 mobile GPU.

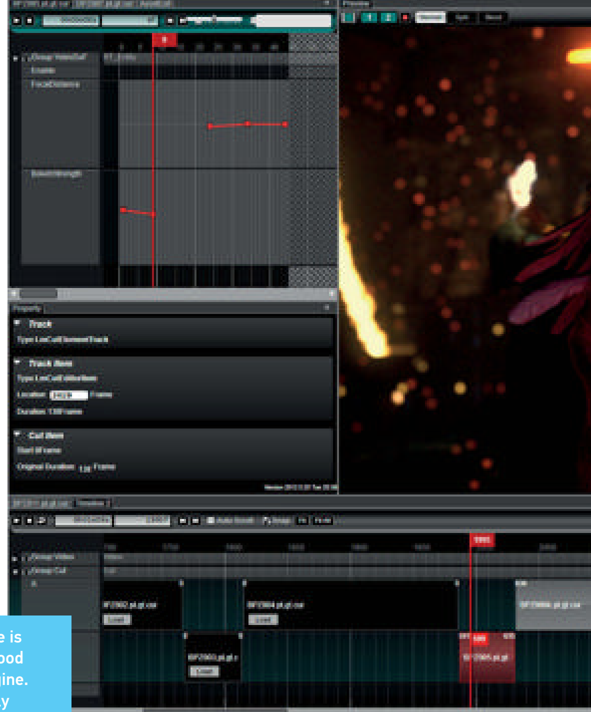
To get something like this built isn't cheap or easy, but a nine-billion-dollar corporation like Nvidia has the capability to do it. Despite that, the firm is not going down the loss-leader route of the platform holders. "We aren't going to subsidise this, we are selling mobile hardware," says Paul "It'll be priced in the range of the tablets."

To demonstrate how powerful its machine is (72 GPU cores!), Nvidia had the developers of *Hawken* (a technically impressive mech game recently released on PC) convert it to Android, to prove that triple-A games can work on the platform. "It's not the full PC version, but we've had a number of people mistake it for the PC version – it looks so good. To be able to take that kind of triple-A content and get it as a native Android application is something you really couldn't do before Tegra 4."

On top of that, the device connects wirelessly with your PC, allowing you to use your PC's superior hardware remotely to run PC games, allowing for superbly beautiful games played anywhere in your house, on any screen (with the HDMI-out from the pad or possibly with forthcoming wireless televisions). "From a technology perspective, there's a lot of core innovation that Nvidia has done to get high bandwidth, low latency streaming of games." This allows you to play almost any games, assuming you can get a gamepad to work with them. "If you look online, there's different profiling software that maps a lot of non-controller PC games to support gamepads. We're investigating that. I've actually played *World Of Warcraft* on a gamepad and it plays quite well; you might not get 100% functionality, but you can do your quests and your dailies." The team are claiming a 20-hour battery life when streaming.

Streaming on the Shield isn't restricted to being from your computer either. Like any other Android device, it can download the OnLive app, which streams any of hundreds of PC and console games from a central server; all your device needs to be able to do is run video. This seemed too far ahead of its time when released in 2010, but now seems normal. "Network speeds and the rate of change of technology are both getting faster." says Bruce Grove, general manager at OnLive. "This is going to make it much harder for local hardware to keep up with the cycle of change and so I expect us to continue to see a shift towards more centralised computing models."

OnLive had problems with the UK's network speeds at launch – its tech was simply too bandwidth-hungry



■ A game is only as good as its engine. Thankfully Unreal Engine 4 looks incredible.



Ouya
The first of the big Android console successes, Ouya is a tiny set-top box that got $8.5m on Kickstarter and will retail for $100. It's already got some exclusive launch titles, like *Final Fantasy III*, but has made one condition: all games on it have to be free to some degree. It's using Nvidia's Tegra 3 GPU and has some really clever ideas.



WHAT NINTENDO MIGHT DO NEXT

■ The Wii U just didn't sell all that well after release, and sales slowed even more after Christmas. Give it six more months of this and there will be talk of Nintendo doing a Sega and moving to a content provider role - which makes good sense so is extremely unlikely. Instead we have to bet that the firm is working on getting a line-up of this-generation titles on the system and dropping the price way low as soon as possible: it'll have to be under $200 by the time the Xbox 720 comes out, otherwise it'll be competing with it. Nintendo will also be pushing hard on its first-party titles, milking *Mario* and *Zelda* for all they're worth. If the firm can pull off another Wii60 stunt, where the WiiU becomes everyone's second console, then it may be safe.



– which led to something near to bankruptcy, but as more gamers and homes upgrade, the firm is becoming more viable. "Today OnLive looks for 5-6Mbps to provide a great experience on a large-screen TV," says Grove. "Our goal is as much as possible to run 720p 60. As bandwidth increases we'll be able to increase video quality and potentially 1080p options in the future. The ease and instant nature of the experience provides advantages over traditional consoles and as developers start to build content specifically for the compute power contained in the data centres, we have the potential to offer vastly different experiences to the traditional local device model."

Of course, OnLive isn't the only game-streaming provider in the marketplace. Sony's opportune but expensive purchase of Gaikai paralleled OnLive's financial troubles, but probably also inspired other companies to get working on streaming. Playcast is another game-streaming company that's aiming to work solely through TVs, and its VP of business Meir Friedlander is cautious about learning anything from either firm. "At first, OnLive's implosion had a negative effect. After a few months, however, people understood that it was about OnLive's technology and business model, not demand for cloud gaming. Gaikai's purchase aligned one major cloud gaming player with a tier 1 console player, which speaks to the viability and potential of cloud gaming. However, we still need to see the offering coming from Sony before we can comment on what it's done to change the industry."

Friedlander is quite clear about what would help cloud gaming grow. "For cloud gaming, input innovations would be a great addition. Cloud gaming is expected to grow the audience beyond mid-core gamers, and so immediate and intuitive gaming input options would really help them get up and running quickly. To aid in that, we have started working on smart TVs and gesture-based input accessories, software and hardware with gesture partners and publishers. The actual offerings will be announced later this year. Android consoles are good news for us. Our technology requires little from the connected console, so once we support one Android device (which we've been working on), adding support for a new one is a matter of a few weeks. It mostly just requires QA. And ultimately, the more consoles we can support, the wider an audience we can reach."

Experimentation with inputs has already started – motion, touch and biometric data is already being considered (see the Steam Box on pages 60-61), but outputs are still in flux. The holy grail of outputs at the moment, as we said in the introduction, is 4K and 8K resolutions; but no console will support that, and most of the devices above are limited by HDMI to only 1080p, so it's unlikely any but indie devs will develop games that support it for Android and/or PC. Chris Doran, CEO of game lighting firm Geomerics, knows a bit about this tech: "4K is potentially the one development that we need to keep an eye on, though I think it will be a while before we see games supporting 4K for full 3D rendering. Currently the vast majority of games run at 720p, and I'd expect this to go to 1080p on next generation. That pushes support for 4K some way out. Also, even if there was a huge uptake in TVs supporting 4K I'm not sure many games would. I think you would get a better experience running the game at 1080p and using some of the compute resources for better lighting and post-processing effects, rather than maxing out the GPU supporting 4K."

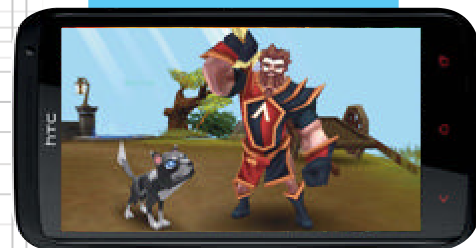
The Oculus Rift is more exciting than 4K (mainly because we've already tried it out and it actually works). This 3D headset has only just finished its Kickstarter and released prototype dev kits, but it genuinely changes how you'll play games – especially games with depth.

Project Shield

Nvidia has lost out in the console war to AMD/ATI, its long-term rival, which is supplying the CPUs and GPUs to both PS4 and Xbox 720. So it has decided to cultivate the Android market with this unique Tegra 4 gamepad console. It has a tiny built-in HD screen, great build quality and can stream games from your PC onto any nearby TV. We want one.



■ Android gains more heat with a selection of cross-platfrom titles.



WHY MOBILE WILL BE THE KINGMAKER

■ AS YOU'VE seen in the main article, most of these new consoles are based on mobile phone technology, specifically Android. However, iOS is also coming to all these platforms, mediated by the iPad and Apple TV. The key thing about these platforms is that mobile is the lowest common denominator; however ambitious your game, however pretty you can make it look, you want it to be on as many platforms as possible. So if you make an Android game, you'll want it to work on your mobile phone too. Given that the next generation of mobile phones is going to surpass the GameStick and possible the Ouya too, it might be worth holding off buying any of these until the dust is settled and you can see what it's worth buying – or whether you should just renew your mobile contract instead.

■ Apple TV could revolutionise the way in which we consume streaming media.





Everything pops out, much more than on a cinema screen, so it's like stepping into a low-res holodeck. It consists of two high-resolution screens on a head-mounted display, with super low-latency between your movements, full head-tracking (so you can look around easily) and a huge field of view. *Doom 3 BFG* and *Unreal* have already been adapted for it, and it's had public support and enthusiasm from id Software's John Carmack, Epic Games and Valve.

FULL STEAM AHEAD

Talking of Valve, we've mentioned many big ideas here, but bigger than all the tech we've talked about by far are the Steam Boxes. Steam is the PC game distribution platform owned by *Half-Life*, *Portal* and *Left 4 Dead* superstar developer Valve, and the Steam Box was a mythical PC-console that would allow players to enjoy all the fun of high-end PC gaming without the need to buy expensive hardware and software like Windows.

These boxes have been rumoured for years, so much so that talking to Valve's marketing manager Doug Lombardi at E3 in 2011, he flat out denied they were working on any such kit. He denied it again last year, talking to Kotaku, and the denials kept coming from all quarters, even as the evidence mounted that the firm was indeed building such a box. Finally, at CES this year, Valve owner Gabe Newell revealed that the company was indeed working on making a Steam console built using off-the-shelf components and Linux.

Why is the Steam Box important? First, it's not just one Steam Box. Valve seems to be behaving like Google did with Android (see above), talking to as many manufacturers as possible, so that there will be a range of Steam Boxes announced very soon. The first was shown off at CES, the Xi3 Piston. This is a teeny-tiny PC that fits in the palm of your hand, but has a lot of power and is fully upgradeable. Indeed, its modular shell means it's even more upgradeable than most full-size PCs. The team has revealed that the system will have up to 1TB of internal storage, eight fast USB 3.0 ports and an HDMI output. On top of that, the X7A system the Piston is based on allows up to 8GB of fast RAM, a 3.2GHz quad-core 64-bit processor and 384-core graphics card. With that specification, you'll be able to play almost any modern PC game at high settings, but it's not cheap – the X7A starts at $999. We expect Xi3 will be able to push these costs down through mass manufacturing, but it's still a premium product.

Secondly, Valve itself will be building its own range of Steam boxes, much like Google's Nexus phone line runs alongside all the other Android phones from manufacturers like HTC (who, for the most part, made better phones than Google). Newell has described these different Steam Boxes as "Good, Better or Best", but even the low-end ones will be able to run almost all of the games on Steam at a reasonable rate. He's talked about one codenamed 'Bigfoot' as the most powerful one, with Littlefoot representing Valve's own mobile offering (whether that's something like a Google Nexus Phone, an Android tablet, an Apple TV or even a Project Shield, we don't yet know.)

Thirdly, again like Android, these are likely to be open platforms. That means anyone can release software for them, or their own applications. Any OEM (a mass manufacturer of hardware) could use the specifications and software recommended by Valve to make cheap Steam Boxes. The operating system itself, Linux, is both free and mature, able to do anything Windows can and more. Given that Nvidia and AMD's graphics technology is increasingly built into motherboards, and how cheap components are, these boxes could easily hit the $200 mark, undercutting the Xbox 720.

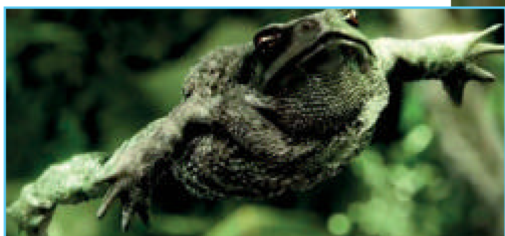
Fourthly, Steam itself is fairly open and powerful. Valve has been talking about letting people organise their own Steam stores, which fits with the third-party devices and allows them a secondary source of income. Valve also has a huge array of social tools, ranging from community engagement (second only to Xbox Live in its slickness and hosting 50 million players) to superb multiplayer integration and matchmaking (as reflected in *Dota 2* and *Team Fortress 2*) to a unique modding system (where users can install, rate and manage mods extremely easily), to cloud storage (allowing you to continue supported save games from another computer) to the new Greenlight system, where consumers can vote new games onto the main Steam store. To say it's cutting edge is almost an understatement.

Fifthly (yes, we're getting tired of these numbers too), it's got officially Weird Inputs and Outputs. Yanis Varoufakis, Valve's economist-in-residence (yes, the firm has its own economist) has reported seeing "a virtual but highly realistic alien stand beside a real human in the same room with you, walk around the room and wink at you. And all that without a screen, a projector or even a computer near you…" Which sounds like Oculus Rift (more on which later). However, talking to Palmer Luckey from Oculus Rift, he told us that Valve is working "on putting virtual

Oculus Rift

This isn't a console but an 3D headset that actually works – we know, we've tried it. It made a ton of money on Kickstarter and has gone into full production of 10,000 developer units. Playing games like *Doom 3* and *Unreal 3* on it is just unreal. Once you've played with Oculus Rift on, other games look slightly lacklustre.

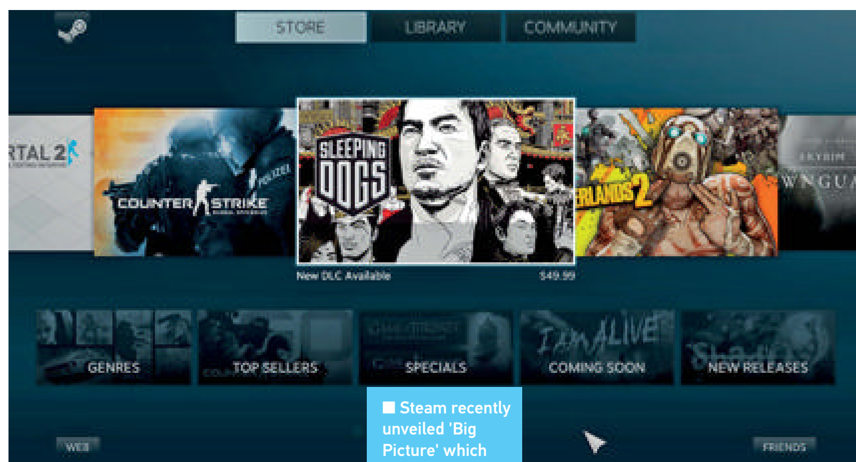
> "The Steam Box is so far ahead of the PS4 and Xbox 720, and so easy to develop successor machines to"



■ Crytek turned some heads with the incredible new upgrades to the CryEngine.



■ Top Secret Tessellated Toad Tech



■ Steam recently unveiled 'Big Picture' which optimises PC games for TV setups.

objects into the real environment; that's very different from the full virtual reality Oculus is going for." This augmented reality has been tried before in games (notably on the Nintendo 3DS and PlayStation Eye), but has been limited to display on a screen – not appearing in the world with you, which is a whole other kettle of economists.

Meanwhile, Newell has talked about how Valve's own Steam Box will use wearable computing – that is, biometric data – as inputs on your games. He's said that it already features eye-tracking software, and that he's interested in EEG implants, heart-rate measurements, the galvanic response of your skin (which measures arousal!) Perhaps it will eventually measure pupil dilation, blood-sugar, time since your last dental appointment… and doing Voight-Kampf checks to see if you're an android or not. It's strange, unearthly stuff, especially if your TV starts telling you to get more exercise and turning itself off.

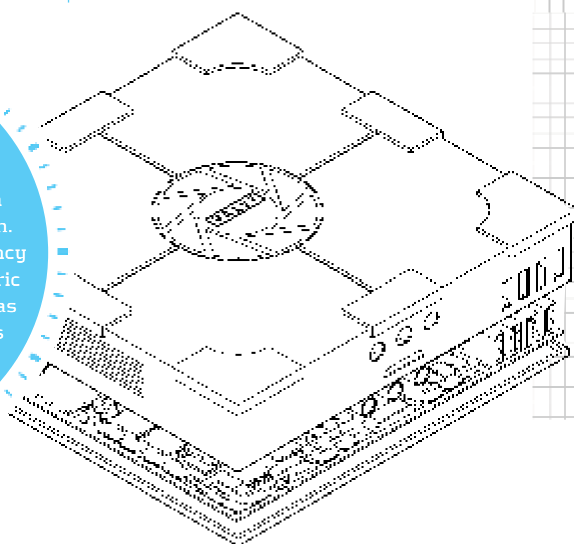
Finally, the more powerful Steam Boxes will be designed to operate as servers, much like your PC does under Project Shield. "Any PC can serve multiple monitors, so over time, you can have one GPU that's serving up eight simultaneous game calls," Newell says. Given that modern high-end PCs can run games at higher than 1080p resolutions across multiple monitors, this shouldn't be surprising.

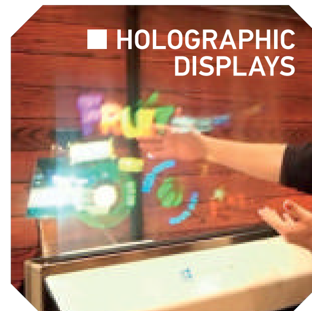
The predictions are that one of Valve's Steam Boxes should release this year. The Steam Box is so far ahead of the PlayStation 4 and Xbox 720, and so easy to develop successor machines to, that it's more in competition with Apple's next offering (whatever that might be), since Apple also uses cutting-edge technology in yearly iOS updates. Given that its manufacturing partners won't want to compete directly with Valve, we're also betting that we'll see Steam-compatible tablet PCs and mobile devices coming out.

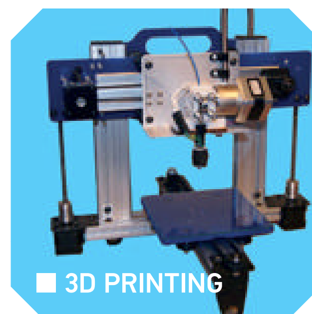
From what we've seen here, it looks like the future of console gaming is open platforms, running open operating systems, that can run any games and aren't picky about who supplies them. They also have a variety of weird inputs, the potential to support almost any output, and are cheap as chips. We're aware that there are elements we've hardly touched on – location gaming, improved AI, brain links, interactive TV, 3D and more – which these platforms will adapt to while the big console platform holders are bleeding each other white. Little wonder that it's become a cliché to call this the last console generation.

Bigfoot Steam Box

Valve is working on its own home hardware. Bigfoot will be sold direct to consumers, be a Linux box, and will be totally open. It'll have a high-precision, low-latency controller and incorporate biometric data and gaze tracking. It can act as a server, serving multiple games throughout the home. Littlefoot is the mobile equivalent.




■ HOLOGRAPHIC DISPLAYS


■ 3D PRINTING


■ BRAIN SENSING

Tech that's coming beyond the next generation

■ NEUROSKY IS A brain-sensing firm, with a sub-$100 cheap headset that allows you to control on-screen objects with your brain. When we talked to NeuroSky at last year's GDC, it mentioned that it was talking to console manufacturers about its device. There's a small chance that the firm is working with Microsoft (Sony's head of research has pooh-poohed brain control.)

Beyond that, we're excited by holographic displays, true top-end 3D, and 3D printing. Imagine printing out a new controller or a *Skylanders* character or something you've made in *Minecraft*? Or computers that genuinely recognise what you say (even regional accents) and talk back? The future is now.

NEXT-GEN TIMELINE

We look back in time – and to the future – to chart the series of events leading to the next generation of gaming



8 JANUARY 2007

■ Apple TV released. This small wireless digital media box integrates any TV with Apple's tech and with many TV stations. Rumours abound that the next version will have console functions too.



28 FEBRUARY 2012

■ A Crytek developer accidentally tweets the name 'Durango' as the working title for the Xbox 720.

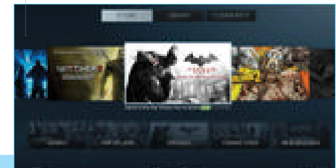


4 MARCH 2012

■ **Following rumours about a Steam Box, a Valve staffer posts a photo of prototype box online. Later, Valve claims this was just a joke.**

8 MARCH 2012

■ Valve has no plans for a game console, it tells Kotaku, just as it reveals its 'Big Picture mode' designed for living-room playing.



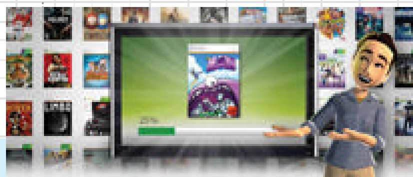


16 MAY 2012

■ Sources confirm more details about the Orbis tech – specifically that it'll use AMD APUs and GPUs.

30 MAY 2012

■ **A *Wall Street Journal* report reveals that both Sony and Microsoft rejected the chance to make their consoles download-only.**





27 JUNE 2012

■ Zipper Interactive is closed. Employee resumés reveal they were working on PS4 games.

8 AUGUST 2012

■ ***Thief 4* (aka *THI4F*) will launch on Xbox 720 and PS4, according to the *Official Xbox Magazine*.**



2 NOVEMBER 2012

■ New PS4 dev kits ship out to developers worldwide, with a final model due for January 2013. They're not being made in Japan.



18 NOVEMBER 2012

■ **Wii U released. Quite possibly Nintendo's last foray as a closed platform, this features 360-generation tech – which won't be enough to cut it against the Android consoles.**





10 JANUARY 2013

■ **Former PlayStation head man, now Xbox head man Phil Harrison warns Valve off starting a console: "entering the hardware business is a hard thing to do."**



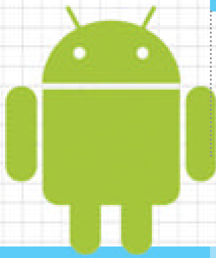
11 JANUARY 2013

■ Major Nelson kick-starts the next-gen countdown, with a countdown of his own: "and it's on..." he says – only 149 days till E3 to find out what he's talking about.

21 JANUARY 2013

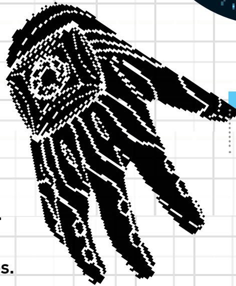
■ **Sony bigwig Kaz Hirai hints that the PS4 will not release until after the Xbox 720, again. Rumours abound of the PS4 ditching the DualShock controller.**





23 SEPTEMBER 2008

■ Android released. In development since 2003, this flexible and open source OS was bought by Google in 2005. It now has 75% of the world's smartphones and 700,000 apps.

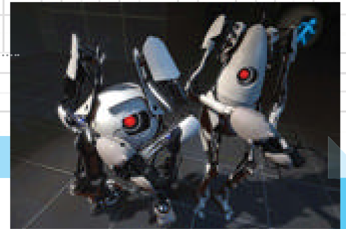


4 NOVEMBER 2009

■ Valve patents a gamepad with customisable inputs to be used on the sofa. In July, it also patented 'biofeedback for controlling a video game state'.

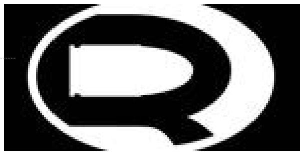
15 JUNE 2010

■ Steamworks arrives on the PlayStation 3 with *Portal 2*, as part of Valve's plans to dominate every damn platform.



22 MARCH 2012

■ *Alan Wake* developer Remedy announces it's hiring staff for 'future generation consoles'.





28 MARCH 2012

■ Rumours of the new PlayStation being codenamed 'Orbis' circulate.



2 APRIL 2012

■ Details are released about the Xbox 720's always-on network and Blu-Ray drive – and a Christmas 2012 release.



3 JULY 2012

■ Ouya announced. This dirt-cheap Android-based games console will retail at $99 and was the most quickly funded Kickstarter project to reach $1,000,000. It'll launch in April.



11 JULY 2012

■ A Microsoft patent reveals that the firm is considering making the 720 more like a PC, by allowing upgrades over time.

8 JANUARY 2013

■ Xi3's Piston box is revealed at the Computer Entertainment Show. This integrated, modular 'PConsole' fits in the palm of your hand. It is mistakenly taken for the Steam Box as Valve has invested in it.



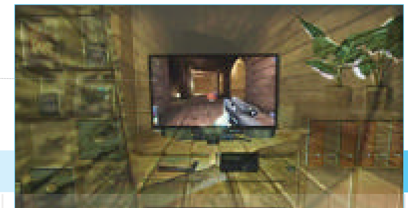
9 JANUARY 2013

■ Gabe Newell finally gives in and tells all about the Steam console, revealing two models – at least. It won't be announced at GDC.



10 JANUARY 2013

■ Microsoft reveals IllumiRoom, the equivalent of visual surround sound, which washes your room with images from the game you're playing.





23 OCTOBER 2013

■ If rumours are to be believed, then Microsoft will be releasing its next generation of console hardware in the autumn of this year.



15 MARCH 2014

■ Sony has admitted that its PlayStation 3 successor will arrive later than the next Xbox, expected to debut in March 2014.

10 APRIL 2014

■ Valve will no doubt want to compete with new consoles, releasing its living-room PC in time to compete with Sony and Microsoft.



Experimentation has become a dirty word. Cookie-cutter hits and designed-by-committee sequels engulf today's triple-A marketplace, with innovation in mega-publishing terms often limited to the inclusion of co-op partners or arbitrary bolt-on multiplayer appendages. It shouldn't come as much of a surprise that both publishers and developers seem less interested in financing an untried product as they are receiving a return on a logical investment, but it still does. We've seen the age of austerity extinguish the creative spark of any studio daring to be different, and the inevitable result is a system wherein games can't just be developed – they have to be groomed. Prodded down a gauntlet of multiple corporate divisions, scrutinised under projected earnings reports, anticipated Metacritic ratings and focus group testing. Even Quantic Dream's multifaceted interactive thriller *Heavy Rain* had projections: Sony estimated it would sell between 200,000 and 300,000 units. It's now shifted over 2 million.

"I am not sure I know what a 'commercial' videogame is," Quantic Dream's effusive CEO, David Cage, ponders aloud to **games™**. "I never start working on a new game thinking 'Okay, this time I am going to do something commercial!' I am driven by passion more than anything, and the desire to create something new and to share it with others. To me, there's a simple idea behind this that if I can create something I find exciting enough to spend three years working passionately on it, then maybe other people will also enjoy playing it."

It's a philosophy that has yet to betray the Frenchman's sharp instincts. Since founding Quantic Dream in 1997, Cage (born David

A BOLD DIRECTION

As Quantic Dream's Heavy Rain follow-up Beyond: Two Souls nears completion, games™ chats with David Cage about storytelling, the allure of Hollywood and the intimate power of videogames

De Gruttola – David Cage is a self-imposed pseudonym) has scripted, designed and directed each of the three titles the Parisian studio has released to market. Futuristic thriller *The Nomad Soul* is traditional in gameplay terms compared to Quantic's subsequent output, but the nascent idea of interactive storytelling would inform future projects. *Fahrenheit* evolved its techniques, sophisticated in layering game mechanics over narrative rather than the more commonly practised alternative. But it was *Heavy Rain* that would proliferate the interactive drama and introduce Cage's unique sensibilities to a wider audience, enabling those unacquainted with a gamepad to grasp the concept and play the part of actor, writer and director across the whole experience.

"Interactive storytelling is a unique experience," states Cage. "Films can trigger a strong emotional response, but no other media can put the player in the shoes of a character for ten hours with the possibility to change what is going on. The player participates in the creation by making decisions that will change the course of the plot. The story becomes a mirror in which the player can look at himself to discover who he is, what he thinks, how he would react in different situations.

"The game industry offers many games based on violence and adrenaline, which works for a certain audience," he adds, "but there is a huge untapped market of people who are not interested in shooting but would be willing to interact in a meaningful emotional experience. This medium is truly amazing because of how it can resonate emotionally with the audience. We are just discovering this potential and I am convinced that we will see more and more exciting titles based on totally new paradigms in the coming years."

"We still read and enjoy books that were written 3,000 years ago or movies shot 50 years ago, but I don't think any game will survive as long" David Cage

Willingly or not, Cage's latest *is* commercial. *Beyond: Two Souls* casts *Juno* and *Inception* actress Ellen Page in the role of Jodie Holmes – one half of the game's playable duo alongside ethereal being Idan. The story spans 15 years of Jodie's life, harnessing the isolation and loneliness consequential of her supernatural gift as the narrative's emotional keystone. Whereas *Heavy Rain* flittered between four characters of varying empathy, *Beyond* has just one on which the audience's investment solely rests – to shoulder the weight of an entire 10-20 hour game is without question a mammoth undertaking for any actor. When asked why he cast a notable Hollywood actress in the lead as opposed to an unknown, Cage senses an insinuation of interfering publishers. "The decision of working with Ellen was certainly not dictated by marketing or the idea of having a nice name to put on a pack shot," clarifies Cage. "It was purely a creative decision. I wanted someone who would look, speak, move, feel like the Jodie Holmes I had in mind. And after talking to Ellen and reading the script together, it was absolutely obvious it could only be her."

It's not the first time that Quantic Dream has collaborated with revered entertainment personalities – David Bowie turned up in *The Nomad Soul* looking like a constipated Tron, and provided the soundtrack. However, as 3D performance capture becomes increasingly prevalent throughout the industry, it's no longer enough to obtain the likeness of a celebrity in a cynical attempt to shift an extra few thousand units, it's an opportunity to collaborate with fellow artists in a nascent medium constantly expanding its narrative toolset. Cage gushes about his leading lady, describing her as a "fantastic mix of strength and vulnerability." Page's involvement wasn't just stepping into a sound booth to bellow a few lines into the microphone: she spent months on the motion-capture stage pouring through the minutiae of Cage's script and immersing herself in the role of Jodie. "We spent a lot of time just talking about the character," says Cage. "We'd discuss how she would move, talk and evolve through the years – Ellen plays Jodie between the age of 14 and 23. We often discussed points of the script on set together, changed lines when we felt Jodie wouldn't say it like that or when Ellen had a better idea. She did a fantastic job at bringing flesh and bones to the character, making her a real breathing person going through many different emotions… Very few young actresses have this palette of acting: she is smart, she can be funny and can make you cry. She was also sincerely passionate about this new experience, and she worked on this project with the same energy and dedication she would have if it were a film."

Talking to Cage, it's clear that the genesis of *Beyond* is equal parts story and technology. Quantic Dream constantly improves on its proprietary engine and motion-capture techniques and the studio's follow-up to *Heavy Rain* represents another momentous milestone in the field – albeit in more subtle advancements. "Technology has very significantly evolved since *Heavy Rain*," Cage points out. "At the time, like most games, we were shooting face and body separately because of technical constraints. In short, it means that the sync between the voice and the body animation was artificially recreated, and a lot of the performance's quality was lost because of this."

An investment in new technology was fundamental before Cage and his team could begin work on Quantic Dream's next project. *Beyond* is the first game to implement the new technology, but the studio released an early glimpse of how the advanced tech enhances the actor's in-game performance in *Kara* – a short film unveiled at GDC 2012.

"With *Kara*, we tried for the first time to use 'performance capture', which is a technology allowing us to capture facial animation, voice and body animation in one take," explains Cage. "The full performance is recorded simultaneously, allowing us to get body language and a perfect sync between body and voice. It also allows us to capture up to six actors at the same time, with contacts between them, the right eyelines (we also capture the eye movements), interactions with props, and we get a level of quality and fidelity that was impossible to reach with the previous tech."

It's rather apposite that this approach is already prevalent throughout Hollywood's CG industry – the last decade-or-so has seen it become the go-to method for creating a 30ft Hulk to punch a flying space dragon, turn a middle-aged British actor into a sharp-toothed potato-loathing imp and adapt a beloved children's book about a journalist and his dog into a blockbuster movie. It uses advanced 3D scanning systems to capture a 3D picture of actors' faces and bodies, enabling a precise recreation of their entire model in 3D. "[We can] create virtual actors, characters that are 3D clones of real actors, having the exact same face,

■ Using the Heavy Rain interface as a placeholder for the time-being, the game will still feature button prompts and simple joypad interactions to control the characters.

"The decision of working with Ellen [Page] was certainly not dictated by marketing or the idea of having a nice name to put on a pack shot" David Cage



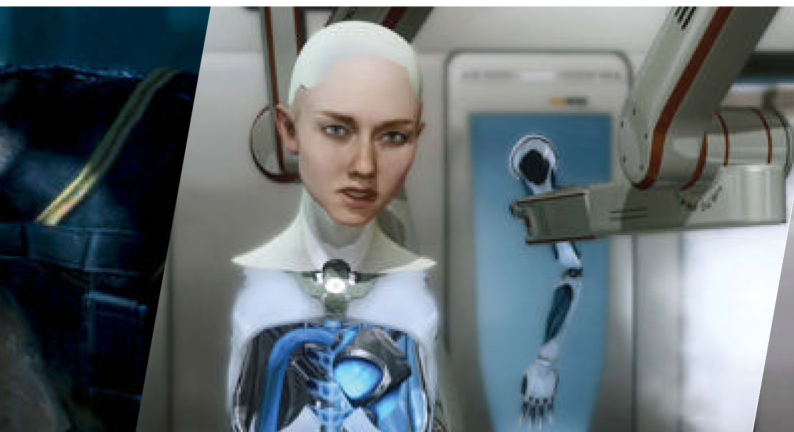

■ Ellen Page's involvement included spending months on the motion-capture stage acting out the role. It's the same technology that Hollywood VFX houses use to create Gollums, Na'vi and Hulks.

BEYOND PLAYSTATION 3

■ SINCE WE spoke to David Cage, news of a potential Quantic Dream PlayStation 4 title has surfaced online. The studio has registered a domain name, 'SingularityPS4.com', which doesn't currently relate to any announced project currently in development at Quantic or Sony. The idea that this could be the name of the developer's first next-gen title is given more credence by the past: previous Quantic Dream domain registrations follow the same pattern of the game name followed by the platform (**heavyrainps3.com** and **beyondps3.com**). Alongside the strong implication that this is the title of the French studio's next game, it also suggests that Sony's new device will be known as the PlayStation 4, rather than the daft 'Orbis' – a name that has been doing the rounds online for several months. Given the early domain registration, it's entirely possible that the game will be revealed at this year's E3.




■ The latest motion-capture technology should eradicate odd floaty-face syndrome that cropped up in the likes of LA Noire. Whether it'll be widely adopted by other developers remains to be seen.



■ Stunning real-time demo Kara wowed the GDC audience in 2012. We can only imagine how far the engine has evolved since the video was created.



body, voice and moves," Cage exclaims. "As a director, I have the possibility to work closely on emotions with actors, knowing that their performance will be completely conveyed in the game engine. Having this technology becomes more and more important, especially when you try to create emotional experiences. They help us to create the player's involvement in the story and the world in general."

Story. Technology. One cannot work without the other in Cage's head and both are fundamental to the director's vision that games should be made with everyone in mind. "For me, the main challenge is to find an idea that will keep me and the team excited every day of the development," he says. "It also has to be based on themes that any audience could relate with, no matter their nationality, age or sex. Writing a story that will resonate with a Japanese, American or German gamer is a very interesting challenge, especially if you don't want to stick to the traditional videogame themes."

Cage strays dangerously close to contradiction as he broaches the subject of consumer appeal once more, but it's clear that each topic he tackles comes from a personal space. "*Heavy Rain* has been a major turning point for me," admits Cage. "It was the game that made me realise that it was possible to use this medium to tell personal things rather than talking about heroes with big muscles fighting hordes of monsters. It sounds obvious to any novel or film writer, but for most videogame writers it is still a territory that we hardly explore. Like *Heavy Rain*, *Beyond* is focused on creating emotional experiences for a more mature audience, but with this game my objective was to do it differently by creating a unique relationship between the main character and the player.

"Many gamers still think that a story-driven experience may be more cerebral or boring than a good old action title. We need to convince this audience that although story-driven games provide a different type of entertainment, they can be as interesting and rewarding to play. The game industry is still very polarised with ultra-hardcore, who only want violent games, and other gamers who are open to different kinds of audiences. Many games, from *Journey* to *Walking Dead*, show that there is a growing interest for games daring to be different, and I believe that this is a very positive thing for the industry."

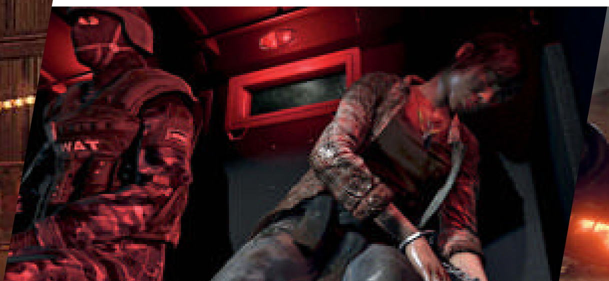
There are still hurdles to jump when striving to bridge the gap between the non-gamer and the converted, and that rests in the palms of our hands. Cage has yet to fully disclose how *Beyond* will control – the in-game footage to date has been presented with *Heavy Rain*'s UI as a placeholder – and the director is reticent, outside of a few vague remarks, to comment on how the interactivity has evolved, while fervently rejecting our genre classification of his previous hit. "Well, I don't think that *Heavy*

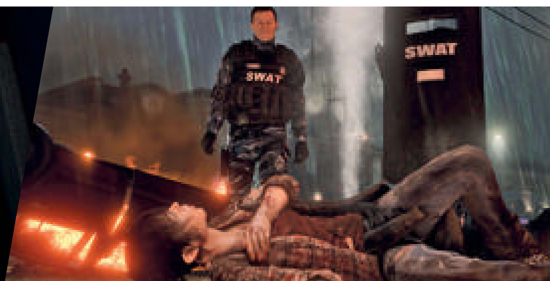
■ *Employing a Hollywood actress in the lead role should lend the game added credibility over Heavy Rain. Don't expect ham-fisted line delivery, inconsistent accents or characters bellowing "Jason!" at regular intervals.*



■ *Idan's perspective views other characters with accompanying auras. Depending on the colour, from muted tones to hard reds, players can determine how innocent or amoral the denizens of Jodie's world actually are.*







"For me, the main challenge is to find an idea that will keep me and the team excited every day of the development" David Cage

Rain was a point-and-click style adventure in any way," he insists. "Point-and-click games are usually based on puzzles, inventories, objects to discover amongst pixels, etcetera. I don't think any of these elements were present in *Heavy Rain*. Sometimes, people get confused and think that any videogame having a storyline is a point-and-click in a way, which I really don't believe." Incidentally, neither does games™, but *Heavy Rain*'s structure most closely resembles the genre that Cage himself admits is enjoying a resurgence since its release. Nonetheless, Cage goes on to explain how his latest game will differ mechanically from his last. "*Beyond* is a very different game from *Heavy Rain*," he says. "For example, it offers the possibility to switch at any time between Jodie and the Entity, which has some specific abilities. The entire interface has been redesigned and the gameplay is different as well. The game takes place over 15 years of Jodie's life, where *Heavy Rain* took place over four days. The player will have to discover many very different locations, some of them being very large with freedom of control and exploration. *Beyond* is definitely not based on the standard videogame paradigms. It is an emotional journey into the life of someone. It is fully interactive, although the main character doesn't carry a gun and doesn't climb on platforms. We are trying to create a different way of playing where the pleasure doesn't come only from your ability to fight but rather from your ability to change the destiny of the main character."

Jodie's destiny is ultimately decided by a myriad of choices the player makes throughout her life, alongside how her nebulous companion interacts within the world (*Beyond* plays out practically asymmetrically, with players switching to Idan, whose vast power ranges from tipping over coffee cups to destroying buildings – all in correspondence with button prompts and gentle twisting of the analogue sticks). "*Beyond* is based on the same concepts of choices and consequences [as *Heavy Rain*], but is managed differently," confirms Cage. "It will also feature many different paths leading to many different endings, with significant choices affecting the story throughout the life of Jodie."

Cage doesn't reveal any more story, only further revealing his own investment in the character and the exaggerated themes players will come to explore and, hopefully, appreciate. "It is not a matter of writing about your life; it is about writing things that emotionally resonate with you instead of writing about things you don't care about," he says. "*Heavy Rain* was about my experience [of] becoming a father, *Beyond* is about growing, accepting who you are and about what's on the other side."

It's curious that issues of mortality and the afterlife play a pivotal role in *Beyond*. After all, Cage is as much an accomplished storyteller in his field as any author, poet, singer or filmmaker utilising the available tools in their respective mediums for self-expression. Legacy must surely be playing on his mind. "We still read and enjoy books that were written 3,000 years ago or movies shot 50 years ago, but I don't think any game will survive as long," he says in a moment of rare self-doubt. "I don't think it only has to do with technology – some old black-and-white and silent films still have the same magic today. It's more with the fact that games are created to be instant entertainment rather than creative or emotional pieces. They do their job and then most people forget about them. Some of them were incredibly creative at the time and I played many of them for hours and hours, but none of them were as important to me as books or films.

"I have no doubt that this is going to change in the coming years and that we will see videogames that people will find inspiring for a long time," he adds. "But a game passing the test of time still has to be created. This is a very interesting challenge for the new game creators in the coming years." And no doubt Cage will dare to tackle it himself, continuing to invent, discover and explore inspired methods of presenting storytelling on an incomparable platform. Experiment or die.





IDAN & JODIE

ONE OF Beyond's most interesting features is how Jodie and Idan interact during the story. "The player can freely switch between each character, which means he can decide how he wants them to behave and how their relationship can evolve," explains Cage. "Jodie doesn't see Idan as an advantage giving her powers. She sees him as a curse, something that will prevent her from leading a normal life. All Jodie wants is to be like anyone else, but Idan's presence makes it impossible. Idan can sometimes be nice and protective, but he can also be jealous, possessive and violent. Jodie will have to accept who she is, someone special, someone different, someone she never wanted to be. Idan is the person she loves and hates the most in the world. She cannot live with him, but she couldn't live without him."

Can Lightning Strike Twice?

As Lightning returns to centre stage, taking the Final Fantasy franchise in a wild new direction, games™ sits down with producer Yoshinori Kitase and director Motomu Toriyama for an exciting first look at Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII

LIGHTNING RETURNS: FINAL FANTASY XIII **IS THE THIRD AND FINAL INSTALMENT IN A SAGA THAT BEGAN WITH 2010'S *FINAL FANTASY XIII.*** Looking quite unlike anything Square Enix has attempted before, *Lightning Returns* seems a well-justified opportunity to play with some fresh ideas.

As he introduces *Lighting Returns* to European press for the first time, producer Yoshinori Kitase throws around some impressive figures. The entire *Final Fantasy* franchise has amassed over 100 million in sales over 26 years. *FF XIII* and *XIII-2* account for close to 10% of that figure, with a combined 9.7 million sold across two platforms. What Kitase doesn't care to mention, however, is what these numbers tell us about the worrying state of the franchise today. The figures reveal that *FF XIII* shipped 6.6 million copies, and it certainly isn't difficult to subtract six from nine, revealing a 3.3 million player void between *XIII* and its polarising sequel. Whether it was disappointment in *XIII*, lack of interest in a follow-up or simply a lack of faith entirely, half of the people who bought into *FF XIII* didn't return.

"There is a risk that some players have been driven away from the series," confesses Kitase, clearly concerned with the falling interest in the franchise. It may come as welcome news to some that Lightning's much hyped return barely resembles previous instalments of the *Final Fantasy XIII* series. In fact, it barely resembles what gamers have come



to expect from a *Final Fantasy* game at all. "With *Lightning Returns* we wanted to focus on giving [the franchise] a brand new feel, a brand new game that can be enjoyed regardless of prior knowledge of the series," explains Kitase.

Each game in the *Final Fantasy XIII* trilogy has been driven by a different concept. *XIII* was 'story driven', perhaps to a fault. The goal was to create an interactive movie experience that felt fast, pulling you from one story moment to the next. *XIII*'s director Motomu Toriyama has spoken in the past about how modern first-person shooters influenced his design, a move that didn't resonate with a large section of the fan base. Many felt the game was too linear, with its endless corridor level design and automated battle system robbing players of the control and depth found in previous iterations. The vocal majority lamented the new direction and, as the sales figures show, deserted the series en masse.

The developers made great strides to rectify this with *Final Fantasy XIII-2*, creating a 'player-driven' world that addressed many of the issues raised through its predecessor. Players were granted greater control over everything from the combat mechanics, introducing a *Pokémon*-esque Feral Link move that let you summon monsters in battle, to introducing a story that reacted to player choice.

L*IGHTNING RETURNS* CONTINUES THE SERIES EVOLUTION THEN. DESCRIBED BY TORIYAMA AS 'WORLD DRIVEN', IT'S A MOVE THAT WILL FURTHER SUBVERT THE EXPECTATIONS SET FOR A JAPANESE RPG. Where worlds usually change and warp to the pace of the story, *Lightning Returns* introduces Novus Partus, a 500-year-old world that reacts independently to the player – where the character is simply part of the bigger picture, not the centre of the universe.

Considering the gradual evolution of the series over the course of the three titles, and the backlash it has garnered, it surprised us to learn that this is all by design. The team always intended for the trilogy to end with a single-character excursion. "We made a decision that we were going to have a sole protagonist in the third instalment ... since the very beginning," Kitase tells us. "[I] had a long conversation with Toriyama-san here and Tetsuya Nomura about which character we should use… and they thought we were going to have to have a female one because we hadn't had a female sole protagonist in the franchise before."

Western fans have voiced concern over Lightning's character in the past, with her reluctance to open up creating a fairly solitary experience. Even Cloud Strife and Squall

Leonheart put their angst aside for long enough to let us get a sense of their motivation. In Japan however, she's seen as a national icon of modern RPGs and the face of Square Enix, as Toriyama loves to remind us: "Lightning is a very strong character, both physically and mentally... but in *Lightning Returns* we're going to put a spotlight on the inside of her, what goes on in her mind and the process in which [she] saves other characters from their emotional struggles, even though she's dealing with her own baggage. Those kind of emotions, the human side of Lightning, is experimented with in this latest instalment... You will get to learn more about her and like her as a character."

So Lightning makes her grand return, and not a minute too soon. The game is set many centuries after the shocking conclusion to *XIII-2* which saw – spoilers – Pulse and Valhalla merged, creating the world of Novus Partus, where the citizens have found themselves cradling immortality.

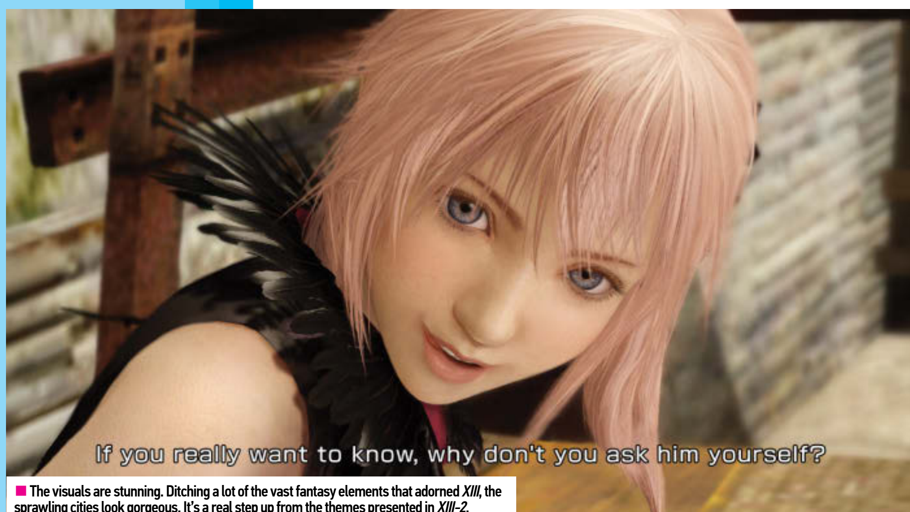
WHILE PLOT DETAILS ARE LIGHT, WE KNOW THAT LIGHTNING HAS BEEN TASKED BY A GOD TO LEAD SOULS OUT OF NOVUS PARTUS, WHICH STANDS ON THE BRINK OF DESTRUCTION, TO A NEW LAND. Nothing can stop the countdown to extinction and so Lightning has just 13 days to shepherd in a new tomorrow.

Lightning will have four continents to explore, all running concurrently to one another in a living and breathing ecosystem. The first is the metropolis Luxerion; known as 'the divine city of light and prayer', it's here where Lightning discovers a religious cult who aren't completely thrilled with her circumventing the rapture, and are murdering any women who resemble the blonde-haired idol in an attempt to assure destiny isn't averted.

It's this idea of an unstoppable apocalypse where the concept of 'world-driven gameplay' really comes into its own. *Lightning Returns* adds a clock to the top right of the screen, which counts down the seconds of the final 13 days. No matter what you do, the world will end in a baptism of fire, so can Lightning earn redemption in her final days? The team stressed that they want players to not think of it as time running out, but instead to see all of the time remaining as an opportunity to do good in the world.

The world runs independently to your actions and movements. If a story event is scheduled to happen in a neighbouring city at 10am and you don't allow for enough time to make the journey, it will happen regardless of whether you're watching or not. The train station gets busy during rush hour because people are going to work, the town gets quiet after lunch and the minutes are always just ticking by. The game is designed with multiple playthroughs in mind and even though certain acts can delay the countdown, you literally won't be able to see everything first time around. It's a bold move on Square Enix's part.

Unsurprisingly, Lightning Returns has drawn some comparison to the seminal Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask, though without a mask to manipulate the flow of time in sight. Tetsuya Nomura is happy to admit that the development team were inspired by the real-life Doomsday Clock, a device that measures how close we are to our own destruction. It advances and rewinds depending on



The visuals are stunning. Ditching a lot of the vast fantasy elements that adorned *XIII*, the sprawling cities look gorgeous. It's a real step up from the themes presented in *XIII-2*.

"Nothing can stop the countdown to extinction and so Lightning has just 13 days to shepherd in a new tomorrow"



The game's day/night cycle affects which monsters spawn and where. Travelling at night is considerably more dangerous.



the impact of good and bad events in the world. Lightning Returns incorporates a similar model; Toriyama is keeping quiet on what actions will actually influence the in-game clock, though we've been led to believe that it can be everything from quest completion to special moves in fights that can increase or sacrifice time.

The unconventional nature of *Lightning Returns* doesn't start and end with the apocalypse, mind – the mission structure is a breath of fresh air for a series that is usually so reliant on simply ushering you from one big-bad to the next.

OUR FIRST GLIMPSE AT THE VARIED MISSIONS TAKES PLACE IN THE AFOREMENTIONED LUXERION, A SPRAWLING CITY BRIMMING WITH LIFE. It's quite a welcome change of scenery after *XIII-2* consisted of sparely populated areas and *XIII* removed cities altogether. It's full of NPCs and vendors just begging to be interacted with – though with time running out, how much time you want to dedicate to shopping for new looks for Lightning will be a tight line to walk. After Lightning discovers the copycat killer's handiwork, she takes on the role of detective, hunting for clues and investigating the murder.

As we are shown in the hands-off demo, the player is mostly left to their own devices, whether it be main or side quests you're embarking on. Aside from an initial indication that a clue has been discovered, the game doesn't have any intention of leading you by the hand – it's far from the 30 hours of tutorial we suffered back in 2010. Further

FINAL FANTASY: AN INEVITABLE EVOLUTION

Final Fantasy **has evolved over the past 25 years. We've seen the series move from mainly turn-based combat to slowly integrating more and more action and real-time aspects. From the addition of Limit Breaks in *VII* to the removal of the class-based role types in *XIII*, the series has been toying with the formula under our noses the entire time. Of course, *Lightning Returns* isn't the first time that *Final Fantasy* fans have had to come to terms with a massive departure from the expected gameplay, and not every attempt works. For every fun rhythm-action game we get... well, we get *All The Bravest*. *Lightning Returns* may have stolen the spotlight for adding some new ingredients to the tried and tested formula, but here are a few other recent *FF* titles to try something new.**

2002

2003

2010

2012

2013



KINGDOM HEARTS

Platform: PS2 **Released:** 2002

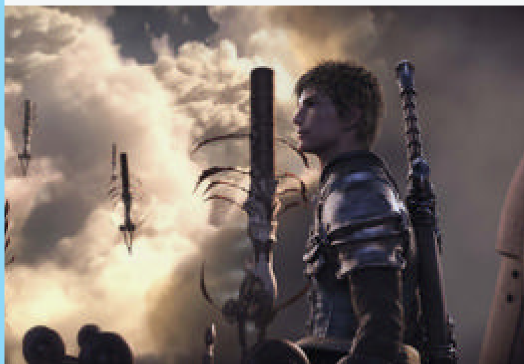
■ THIS COLLABORATION between Square and Disney is one of the most popular *FF*-related games to date. Action adventure met Eastern RPG elements in a fun adventure that merged the two universes together seamlessly. *Kingdom Hearts* stands as the perfect example of how to cross one franchise over to another. Considering the success of this spin-off franchise, there's no doubt that *Kingdom Hearts* gave way to the surge in extracurricular activities *Final Fantasy* has seen over the past decade, but it's okay. For every *All The Bravest* or *Dirge Of Cerberus*, we get something as fantastic as this. *Kingdom Hearts 3* can't come soon enough.

FINAL FANTASY: TACTICS ADVANCE

Platform: GBA **Released:** 2003



■ IT'S NO surprise really that this stands as one of the best titles to spin out of the franchise. Coming off the back of the PSone classic, it boasted incredibly deep gameplay, a sophisticated narrative and likeable characters – it's certainly one of the best turn-based strategy games to grace handheld gaming. The wide variety of character classes and epic combat translated perfectly to the smaller screen. Every move needed to be considered: *Tactics Advance* had a pretty steep learning curve but was endlessly rewarding. Of all the chances Square have taken with *FF* over the past 25 years, *Tactics* still stands as the perfect way to honour a series in a completely fresh style.



FINAL FANTASY XIV

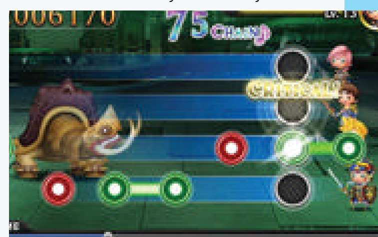
Platform: PC, PS3 **Released:** 2010

■ AFTER THE success of *XI*, Square venturing back into the MMO space with *XIV* was an exciting prospect. Sadly, it was a cascading mess. Slow grind and boring quests aside, basic game mechanics didn't function, it was riddled with game killing bugs and the interface was a mess that no amount of love for the series could clear up. Reception was so poor for *XIV* that it prompted Hiromichi Tanaka to quit as producer, then leave the firm entirely. However, *Final Fantasy XIV* is being given another chance in *A Realm Reborn*, boasting a new, well... new pretty much everything else. It's looking impressive and despite us getting burned before, we can't help but get excited.

THEATRHYTHM

Platform: 3DS, iOS **Released:** 2012

■ SHINING THE spotlight onto one of the most popular components of the *Final Fantasy* franchise was money in the bank. A celebration of the music just in time for the 25th anniversary, *Theatrhythm* let players fight, dance and slowly walk through some of the series' most popular pieces. Whether it was *VII*'s 'One Winged Angel' or 'Man With A Machine Gun' from *VIII*, all the favourites were ready to be conquered on the move. *Theatrhythm* really is, in many ways, the perfect celebration of *FF*, and despite initial thoughts on a rhythm-action game not being necessary, when you think about it, it's surprising this didn't come any sooner.





ALL THE BRAVEST

Platform: iOS **Released:** 2013

■ AS MUCH as we admire Square Enix for trying to diversify the series, there's always the risk of taking it a step too far. iOS title *All The Bravest* was that step. Playing up to 16-bit nostalgia, it was pitched as big battles, with bigger bosses, fighting as our favourite *FF* characters. Awesome. Not so awesome, however, was gameplay devoid of skill, expensive level packs and the final insult: premium 'classic' characters. If you could option your character, no problem, but putting your money into a virtual roulette machine and hoping it would be the one you want is unacceptable.



Lightning's new-found freedom in battles extends out into the world. With clues for the murder investigation hidden throughout the city, we expect much more freedom to explore.

investigation throughout Luxerion leads the way to the cult's back door and, interestingly, a stealth section to get a closer look, with Lightning ducking and weaving behind barrels in a fashion very similar to that of *Assassins Creed*.

This may sound like blasphemy to a certain section of the *Final Fantasy* audience, but the team are clearly utilising their time spent working with Western developers. "Not sure about the future of the *Final Fantasy* franchise itself, but obviously there are a lot of great studios under the [Square Enix] umbrella," begins Kitase when we quiz him on the possibility of handing over development to a Western studio. "I myself have been communicating with creators in those studios, at the Montreal studio, and also Crystal Dynamics in America. I've been very impressed that these developers are very enthusiastic about making great games in future, so from my point of view I would be [creatively] stimulated without a collaboration, so I would like to keep communicating with those studios in future."

IT ISN'T CLEAR FROM THE HANDS-OFF DEMO JUST HOW WELL THESE STEALTH SECTIONS PLAY, NOR WHETHER THEY AMOUNT TO ANYTHING MORE THAN A GIMMICK SLAPPED ONTO A TIRED JAPANESE FRANCHISE DESPERATE TO STAY RELEVANT, BUT WE CERTAINLY CAN'T FAULT SQUARE ENIX FOR AT LEAST TRYING A DEPARTURE FROM THE TESTED FINAL FANTASY GAMEPLAY.

In case you were hoping to simply forget about the previous entries' lore – *Lightning Returns* is set several centuries into the future, after all – it looks like the fal'Cie, l'Cie and Bhunivelze nonsense with be returning along with a host of previous faces. It seems no matter how far forward you travel into your future, you can never forget your past.

"A stealth section sees Lightning ducking and weaving behind barrels, Assassin's Creed style"

Hope will be returning in a *Metal Gear* Otacon role, assisting Lightning over com-link with helpful tips and background information on characters and situations. *XIII-2*'s Noel Kreiss will also be making a return, though he's taking an antagonistic role this time round, operating under the name 'Shadow Hunter.' We aren't sure what's got him so angry, but clearly after spending the entirety of *XIII-2* searching for Lightning with only-sister Serah for company, he's a little annoyed that Lightning has returned of her own accord ushering in the apocalypse in her wake. Speaking of Serah, Square Enix showed off a young girl named Lumina in the demo who bears an uncanny resemblance to Lightning's sister – something they were keen to point out… 'expect more characters from *XIII* to make appearances throughout' is the message we took away.

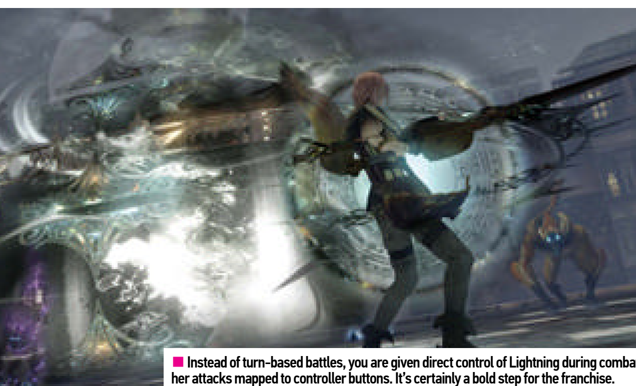
Perhaps we've left the most polarising aspect of *Lightning Returns* till last, and if you're even slightly enthralled by the prospect of Square Enix taking the franchise in a new direction, then this likely to be the deciding factor.

As with every other aspect of *Lightning Returns*, Square Enix has completely overhauled the battle system. If the digression from the classic turn-based style over the years has caused you any degree of distress, then you may want to take a deep breath before continuing. Taking Toriyama's action-game influence a step further, the battles now play out completely in real time. Each face button on the controller is mapped to a dedicated combat option, with Lightning able to duck, dive and dodge freely with the thumbstick as well. We can only get so much from the hands-off demo, but this is certainly a bold step forward for the series.

"Yes… when we talk about the visual side of the battles, if you think about the traditional RPG or JRPG, [driven] by command battle systems, you have to wait for your enemy to



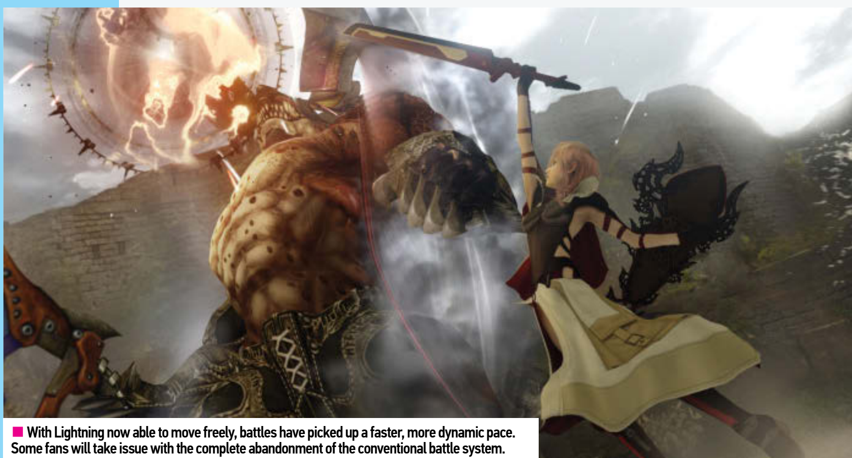
With the Doomsday Clock at two minutes to midnight, the world is quickly coming to an end. Lightning can't stop the apocalypse, but can ease souls into a new world before it arrives.



Instead of turn-based battles, you are given direct control of Lightning during combat, her attacks mapped to controller buttons. It's certainly a bold step for the franchise.

THE END OF VERSUS?

■ *Final Fantasy: XIII Versus* has been in development for over seven years now, and despite assertions otherwise, it looks to be condemned to development hell forever. That's not to say it isn't living on in spirit through *Lightning Returns*; in fact, many aspects of *Versus* look to have been integrated into Lightning's last adventure. It was always set within the Fabula Nova Crystallis mythos, but was said to be a far more realistic take on the franchise, and looking at the quests in *Lightning Returns* – solving murders, investigating crimes and the like – the latter is clearly taking on that slightly sombre and realistic tone. Going back to E3 2006, *Versus* was described as an action-RPG that utilised a real-time battle system letting players move around seamlessly in combat… it might just be us thinking outside the box, but we'd be surprised if *Versus* ever saw the light of day, what with *Lightning Returns* offering such a diverse package.



With Lightning now able to move freely, battles have picked up a faster, more dynamic pace. Some fans will take issue with the complete abandonment of the conventional battle system.

attack you – which is highly unrealistic," reflects Toriyama. "In order to pursue a more realistic depiction of combat, I think this is the way… the mainstream way, anyway."

WITH THE NEW CUSTOMISATION SYSTEM FOR LIGHTNING, PLAYERS CAN PICK AND CHOOSE UP TO THREE STYLES, EACH WITH THEIR OWN LOOK AND ABILITIES. Each style can then be customised fully by the player, letting you mix and match equipment and abilities to find your perfect play-style balance. While this summons memories (nightmares) of *Final Fantasy X-2*'s dress sphere system, it's appears to be more customisable than anything found in previous *Final Fantasy* games, having far more in common with *XIII*'s Paradigm system.

Each style has its own Active Time Battle (ATB) gauge that acts as a resource bar for Lightning's abilities throughout skirmishes. Switching between the styles can be done seamlessly with the tap of a shoulder button, no long casting times, no invasive cinematic – it's a fluid transition that does well to maintain the tempo of the battles.

We can only hope that the development team remember that even among all this innovative change and chances, this isn't the time to create more lost opportunities. The hands-off demo looks to be a welcome blend of action brawler and party-based combat, and despite Lightning being the brawn, the mage and the priest all on her lonesome in combat now, smart players will easily be able to build a combination of styles that makes her a party unto herself.

Lightning Returns offers a lot to take in, and without getting hands-on we can't say whether its ideas and vision can be properly executed, but we are certainly intrigued. *XIII* and *XIII-2* had their fair share of problems, and instead



of addressing individual issues, Square Enix has decided to throw the rule book away and create an entirely new experience within a sandbox we thought we were already well accustomed to.

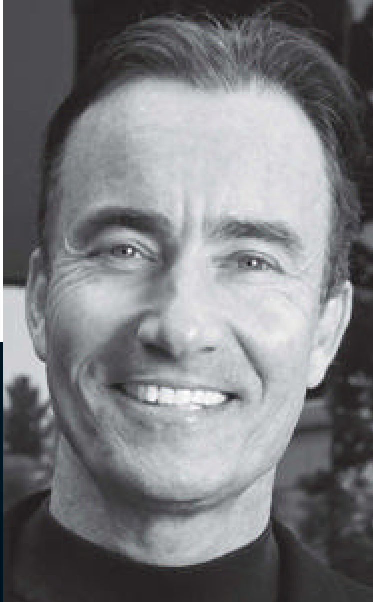
The customisation options, the extensive changes to the battle system and the unique world-driven mechanics are certainly going to offer a new challenge for fans of RPGs, and *Final Fantasy* in general – it could turn out to be a disaster of epic proportions, but you can't fault the team for trying something unexpected.

For Kitase, still celebrating last year's 25th anniversary of the franchise, it seems now is the perfect chance to try something new; it's a transition that he's very reflective of, but he knows the challenges ahead more than anyone. For now all we can do is wait, and pray, that *Lightning Returns* is every bit as enjoyable to play as it is to try to unravel its mysteries.

"Obviously we celebrated the 25th anniversary of the franchise last year – 25 years ago I was an undergraduate, and obviously I was a keen game player back then. The *Final Fantasy* franchise meant exploring the maps, going to different locations, but what really stood out was the stories and drama. Now, 25 years on, as a creator, it's the kind of tradition I wants to pass down to the next generation. There are a lot of games that can give you fun, but I want *Final Fantasy* to be more than that – I want it to be something that resonates with your mind, or moves you, or appeals to your emotions. That's the kind of game I want to create."



Trip Hawkins



Jordan Chey





Perfect Dark Player Manager Kick Off

Dino Dini

Jon Hare

Mega Lo Mania Cannon Fodder

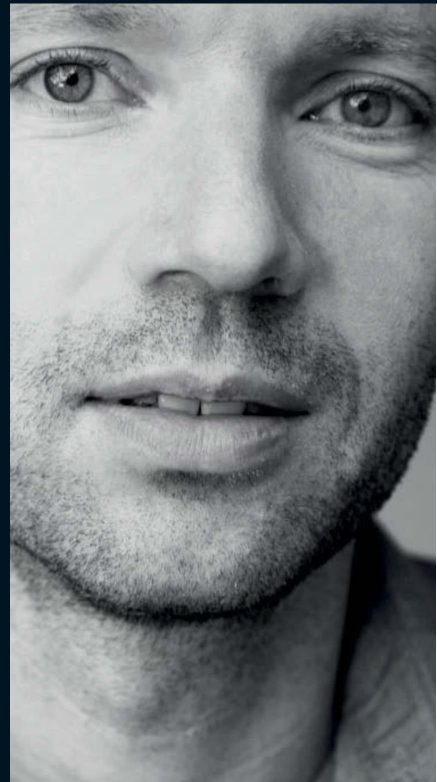




Banjo Kazooie

Jordan Mechar

Assassin's Creed III: Liberation



WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

Julian Gollop

Populous Magic Carpet Dungeon Keeper Theme Park Syndicate Carmageddon: Reincarnation



Steve Ellis

Laser Squad

The development heroes of yesteryear haven't disappeared – they're still around, still developing, still creating. games™ went and hunted down a few of those involved in some of the most enduring, classic titles ever made to ask them about the past, the present and the future. Oh, and Kickstarter

Les Edgar

Karateka The Last Express

UFO: Enemy Unknown

Grant Kirkhope

EA









Despite its promise, the 3DO is probably better left forgotten

The father of Electronic Arts

NAME: TRIP HAWKINS
PAST WORK: EA, EA Sports, 3DO, Digital Chocolate
CURRENT WORK: If You Can
NOTABLE CREATIONS: Electronic Arts, 3DO console





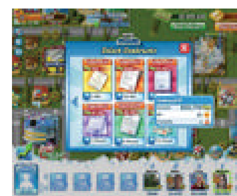
EA has kept us in the game since 1982.

ON... PROUDEST GAMING MOMENTS: "Being the founder of EA. Without me there is no EA. I also like that I am the inventor and creator of EA Sports but unlike most inventors, I built and ran the business. After those, my deal with Sega blew the lid off EA's value, and I made big contributions to the history of the PC."

ON... THE FAILURE OF THE 3DO: "We don't have time or space for that! In summary I concede the product and business model were too far ahead of their time."

ON... BEING LESS WELL-KNOWN THAN 20 YEARS AGO: "Honestly I prefer and enjoy being more anonymous and moving more normally through life."

ON... THE DIRECTION HIS CAREER HAS TAKEN: " My career path perfectly prepared me for my current mission, which I consider a gift from God. I enjoy creation and am giving more back."



Millionaire City is perfect for wasting away the hours on Facebook.

ON... THE MODERN-DAY EA AND HOW IT'S GOING: "Not for me to say."

ON... KICKSTARTER AND THE DIGITAL AGE: "I love digital, it puts all the value on being original and making great product."

ON... THE FUTURE: "I will tell you later."

As much as you might love *Football Manager*, this is where it all began.

The Kick Off, Player Manager and Goal creator

NAME: DINO DINI
PAST WORK: Anco, Abundant Software, Z-Axis, DC Studios
CURRENT WORK: Igneous Entertainment, Breda University Of Applied Sciences
NOTABLE RELEASES: Kick Off, Kick Off 2, Player Manager, Goal!



ON... PROUDEST GAMING MOMENTS: "*Player Manager*."

ON... THE FEELING OF BEING A DEVELOPER OF 'CLASSICS': "Amazing, and frustrating because I have not been able to continue as an indie developer since. But hopefully I can find a way back."

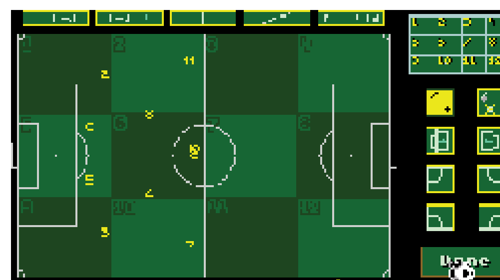
ON... THE ENDURING POPULARITY OF SAID CLASSICS: "I think it is important to appreciate the past as well as look to the future. As long as one can remain in the present while doing so!"

ON... RETURNING TO DEVELOPMENT: "The moment I find a way to make games for living again, I imagine I will jump at the chance (perhaps in combination with what I am doing now). How could it be any other way?"

ON... KICKSTARTER AND CROWDFUNDING: "Theoretically, it is a perfect scenario. The recent success of *Elite Dangerous* is very significant for me, because that game had a great influence on me as a game designer. It gives me hope, because if David Braben can raise more than £1.5 million, then surely I could raise 10% of that, which is all I would need to publish a follow up to *Player Manager*."



Football games really haven't evolved that much in two decades.



ON... THE FUTURE: "I want to start a PhD, record an album, build my public profile, release some games and graduate more students. And after all that, do it again, only better."

ON... THE RETURN OF THE CLASSIC GAMES: "I am working on plans to bring back some of my games and continue where I left off. It is all at the planning stage at the moment, however, and I am spending most of my effort trying to connect with people I can work with."

The person who made Rare's games sing

NAME: GRANT KIRKHOPE
PAST WORK: Rare, Big Huge Games
CURRENT WORK: Spark Unlimited, freelance
NOTABLE RELEASES: GoldenEye 007, Banjo Kazooie, Perfect Dark, Viva Piñata, Kingdoms Of Amalur: Reckoning, Desktop Dungeons



ON... PROUDEST GAMING COMPOSITIONS: "I'd have to say Bedtime Story from *Viva Pinata 2* and Tirnoch from *Kingdoms Of Amalur: Reckoning.*"

ON... THE FEELING OF BEING A COMPOSER OF 'CLASSICS': "I've said this before but I really believe for an artist of any persuasion, be that a writer, painter, photographer or whatever, to have one single person like what they create is truly humbling, I don't know how else to put it!"

ON... WORKING AT RARE: "I worked with the same team for most of my time there and they are all still good friends and I really miss them. Sometimes everything just clicks together as if it was supposed to be like that, and that was how it felt to be with those people. I couldn't fail to be inspired by the worlds and characters they created."

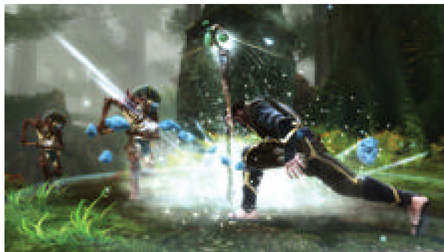
ON... THE MODERN RARE: "There has been a lot of Rare bashing over the years but I think that people need to realise that it isn't the studio it was, the people that made those games aren't there any more. I was speaking to one of the management guys about it a little while ago and he said that we shouldn't focus on what we don't like but try to focus on the great things that we remember and let Rare move on to whatever it is they want to do next."

ON... THE FUTURE: "I'm currently working on the next *Ninja Gaiden* game, *Desktop Dungeons* with my mate Danny Baranowsky and an unannounced project."



Despite its FPS pedigree, Rare did great things in the platforming space.

Perfect Dark assured us that sci-fi could exist alongside first-person shooters.



Kingdoms Of Amalur let Todd McFarlane run wild in a fantasy setting.



What a strange and obsessively wonderful farming game.



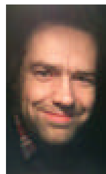
Sensible World Of Soccer fell at the 3D hurdle. It didn't recover.

The man who co-founded a Sensible empire



Mega Lo Mania was a time-travelling god game in space. 'Nuff said.

NAME: JON HARE
PAST WORK: Sensible Software, Codemasters, Legba, Nikitova Games, Jagex
CURRENT WORK: Tower Studios, Vivid Games
NOTABLE RELEASES: Sensible Soccer, Wizball, Mega Lo Mania, Cannon Fodder, Speedball 2 Evolution, Word Explorer



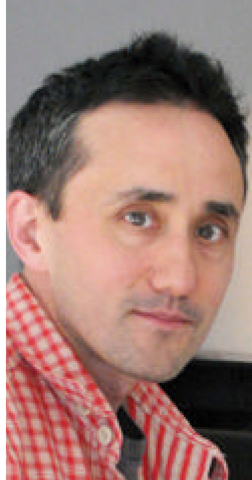
ON... PROUDEST GAMING MOMENTS: "*Sensible World of Soccer, Mega Lo Mania, Wizball* and *Wizkid.*"

ON... THE FEELING OF BEING A DEVELOPER OF 'CLASSICS': "Without any of our games having been remembered as classics I would be very pissed off and miserable by now, so I am very happy to be remembered as someone successful and talented."

ON... THE ENDURING POPULARITY OF SAID CLASSICS: "It is really boring that people are always looking to the past as if it were the future, especially when they are talking about titles I no longer own or control. Of course I love these titles as part of my past… but all they are for me are happy memories."

ON... THE MODERN INDUSTRY: "I feel like now is a very bad time to be making original games if you are an independent, experienced professional who does not want the ball and chain of running and financing his own studio. It is a good time if you are young, or newly independent and feel like you have nothing to lose, which is advisable because you will probably lose it!"

ON... KICKSTARTER AND CROWDFUNDING: "I think there is a 50/50 chance that I may look at one of these platforms to make a game



The rational co-founder of Irrational Games

NAME: JONATHAN CHEY
PAST WORK: Looking Glass Studios, Irrational Games, 2K Marin
CURRENT WORK: Blue Manchu **NOTABLE RELEASES:** Thief, System Shock 2, BioShock, SWAT 4, Tribes: Vengeance, Freedom Force, Card Hunter

ON... SYSTEM SHOCK 2: "When we set out to make it we essentially had no idea what we were doing, so to make something that people still look back on fondly is pretty special."
ON... BIOSHOCK: "[It] has clearly reached the most people, so I'm very proud of my role on that."
ON... FREEDOM FORCE: "The first game we made in our Australian studio – with a new team, most of whom had never worked on a game before. I still find it hard to believe we got that done, let alone that we made something that a lot of people really enjoyed playing."
ON... CARD HUNTER: "Of all the games I've made, it's the one that's the most fun to play while it's being made. Generally by this stage of a project I'm heartily sick of the game, but I actually look forward to playing *Card Hunter* whenever I can."
ON... THE FEELING OF BEING A DEVELOPER OF 'CLASSICS': "To be honest, it all feels like a bit of a con – any day now people are going to wake up and realise that *System Shock 2* was a shonky piece of rubbish!"
ON... HAVING A REPUTATION THAT PRECEDES YOU: "My gameography is an incredible asset that makes it much easier for me to keep doing what I want to, so I'm happy to lean on it whenever I can."
ON... THE MODERN INDUSTRY: "It's a great time to be in [it] because things are changing and getting shaken up. No one can rest on their laurels right now, which means lots of exciting and creative things are happening."
ON... KICKSTARTER AND CROWDFUNDING: "You can now scale and finance a game to hit a particular group without worrying about the 'mainstream' or 'core gamers' or any of that crap."
ON... THE FUTURE: "At some stage I want to get back into first-person simulations… I have some unfinished battles to fight that I'd like to resume free of publisher constraints."



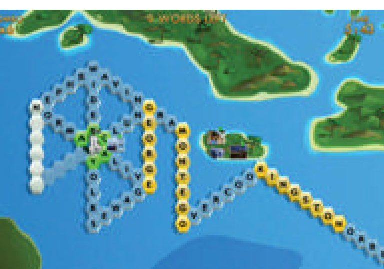
System Shock 2 would set the template for BioShock.

Freedom Force was a fun if not fully realised experience.

Collectable card battles meets turn-based, role playing good times? Sign us up!

If ever a game highlighted the potential of a console, it was BioShock and the world of Rapture.

Nothing more exhilarating then hunting words.



within the next year or so, but in general I think this is a temporary rather than a permanent solution to the problem of funding games."
ON... THE FUTURE: "*Word Explorer* is my big games project now for iOS, PC and Mac. *Speedball 2 Evolution* is also due out early this year on a few platforms, including PC."

M.I.A

Not everyone was willing – or able – to speak, but these legends are still in the limelight in some way

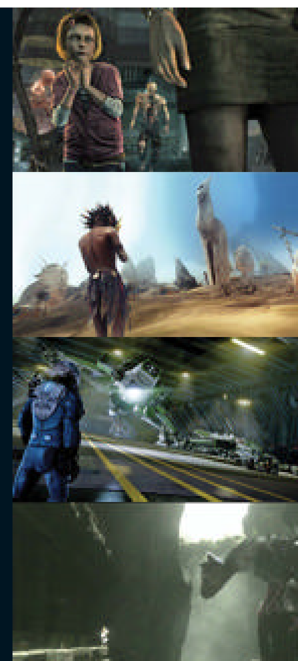
NO LONGER working with Ubisoft Montpellier, **Eric Chahi's** most recent contribution to gaming was the well-received *From Dust*. The creator of *Another World* and *Heart Of Darkness* has disappeared once more – though hopefully this time not for another 15-or-so years.

Paul Cuisset, on the other hand, has not disappeared again. The *Flashback* creator – most recently involved with the creation of (and the fixing of) *AMY* – hasn't announced any new projects, but rumours suggest that his studio VectorCell is working on a *Flashback* remake.

The massive success of **Chris Roberts's** crowdfunding experiment for his *Star Citizen* labour of love almost immediately validated the *Wing Commander* and *Freelancer* creator's very public declaration of love for a genre most publishers would laugh off as dead. Though this didn't cause him to respond to our messages.

Fumito Ueda is, by all accounts, still working hard on *The Last Guardian* – but whatever his next plans are, it's doubtful they'll be anything to do with a game being announced in an obvious, straightforward fashion and released that same month.

And if you want to know what BioWare co-founder **Augustine Yip** is up to, just go to Calgary and visit the medical practice he currently works for. No, he's not about to bring out any new games.





NAME: **JORDANMECHNER**
PAST WORK: Broderbund Software, Smoking Car Productions, Ubisoft Montreal **CURRENT WORK:** Liquid Entertainment, various movie/graphic novel works **NOTABLE RELEASES:** Prince Of Persia, Karateka, The Last Express, Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time, Karateka HD remake

The original Prince-maker (Of Persia)

ON... PROUDEST GAMING MOMENTS: "*Prince Of Persia*. It's the one that's just kept on going and that led to so much else, including *Sands Of Time*, which is another of my favourites."

ON... THE FEELING OF BEING A DEVELOPER OF 'CLASSICS': "It's a great feeling to hear that a game I worked on has given someone a good memory or meant something to them in their lives."

ON... THE ENDURING POPULARITY OF SAID CLASSICS: "I'm very lucky that *Prince Of Persia* has had the kind of success it's had. It's opened a lot of doors for me."

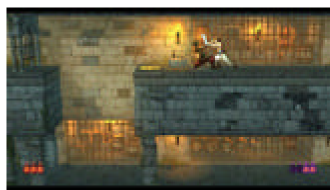
ON... THE MODERN INDUSTRY: "I feel incredibly lucky to have landed in this place where I'm able to work in so many different media that I love – games, movies, and graphic novels. I didn't foresee or plan it, but it's turned out better than I could have hoped."

ON... KICKSTARTER AND CROWDFUNDING: "Today is an incredibly exciting time for solo or independent developers. For the first time since the 1980s, it's once again possible for one person or a small team to make a game using no special equipment or resources, other than ingenuity and imagination, that can nonetheless reach a huge audience or even revolutionise the industry."

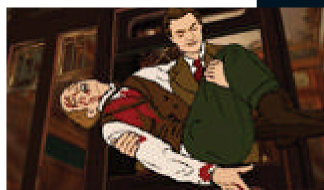
ON... THE FUTURE: "My next project is not a videogame but a graphic novel – *Templar*, [to] be published by First Second in July 2013... I hope gamers who like graphic novels and historical adventures will check it out."



Rescue the princess with dragon punches instead of red overalls.



After a few dreadful instalments, we'd love to see *PoP* return to 2D.



The Last Express: good concept that never worked in execution.

X-COM's original commander

NAME: JULIAN GOLLOP
PAST WORK: Target/Mythos Games, Codo Technologies, MicroProse, Ubisoft Sofia **CURRENT WORK:** Gollop Games **NOTABLE RELEASES:** Laser Squad, Rebelstar, UFO: Enemy Unknown, Lords Of Chaos



ON... PROUDEST GAMING MOMENTS: "*UFO: Enemy Unknown*... I am also particularly fond of *Chaos*."

ON... THE FEELING OF BEING A DEVELOPER OF 'CLASSICS': "It's great to have created games which so many people appreciated. I just hope there is some more juice left in me to create some future classics."

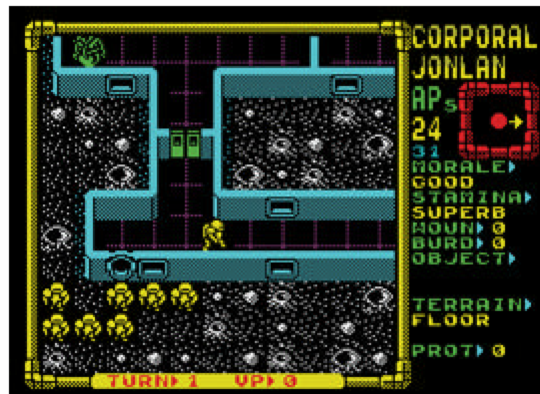
ON... TAKING A BREAK FROM DEVELOPMENT: "I did have a break from development for a year after moving to Bulgaria in 2005, but that's as long as I could manage before the urge to create games compelled me to get back to work."

ON... FIRAXIS'S XCOM REBOOT: "It would have been nice to have worked on it, for sure, but now that Firaxis have created a truly great game I am happy that *XCOM* is in safe hands. I really hope this leads to some kind of renaissance for turn-based strategy games in general."

ON... KICKSTARTER AND CROWDFUNDING: "It has made a huge difference to indie game developers, being able to get publicity, backing and distribution for their projects. I would say that it is fuelling indie game development at a frightening pace."

ON... THE FUTURE: "At the moment I am working on a remake of my 1985 ZX Spectrum classic *Chaos*, a turn-based strategy game of fighting wizards... Everybody is welcome to follow my progress at **www.gollopgames.com**, and I will be releasing playable test versions of the game as I go along."

Lords Of Chaos sent you into a creepy dungeon as an old man wizard. No fair!



The one that isn't Peter Molyneux

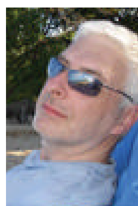
NAME: LES EDGAR PAST WORK: Bullfrog, EA, Creature Labs, Lost Toys Ltd, VIS Interactive **CURRENT WORK:** Stainless Games, Kuju
NOTABLE RELEASES: Populous, Magic Carpet, Dungeon Keeper, Theme Park, Syndicate, FIFA Soccer, Carmageddon Reincarnation



Populous still stands as one of the best god games ever created.

Nothing better than blasting monsters from a *Magic Carpet*.

Despite a woeful recent reemergence, we still have fond memories of *Syndicate*.



ON... PROUDEST GAMING MOMENTS: "*Populous* – [the] groundbreaking invention of the god genre."

ON... BEING A DEVELOPER OF 'CLASSICS': "It still amazes me when people tell me they played some of our games and mention them with a sort of awed reverence – particularly when they appear to be 20 years younger than me!"

ON... THE ENDURING POPULARITY OF SAID CLASSICS: "There was a great sense of 'belonging' with the original Bullfrog team which almost overrode the importance of the game in some cases, but it was this spirit that forged these classics and is probably the one thing that most people who worked at the company, including myself, would say they miss most."

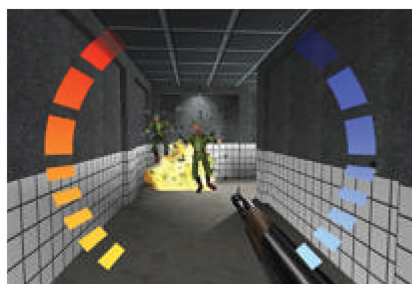
ON... EX-BUSINESS PARTNER PETER MOLYNEUX'S CAREER: "Bullfrog seems to have had a long-lasting indelible impact on Peter and [he's] subsequently done some great stuff, although I have no doubt he has faced many challenges in producing the games, as we did at Bullfrog. He appears to have kept innovation and quirkiness as cornerstones of design."

ON... KICKSTARTER AND CROWDFUNDING: "It is having an effect on development as it allows a team to get to a demonstrable product before approaching a publisher or VC for money... It focuses the team's mind on what is important to the consumer as they have to effectively make a sales pitch to their end-users to raise the money."

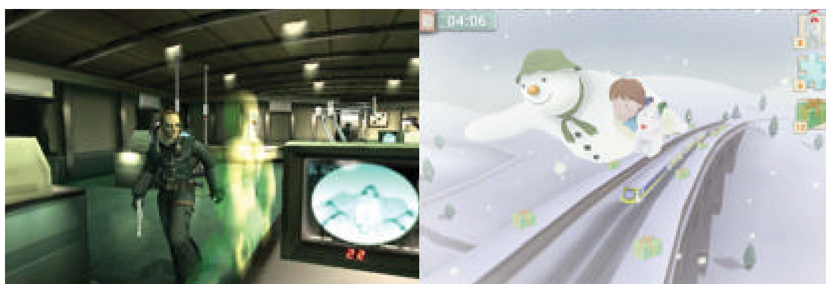
ON... THE FUTURE: "I have a feeling though that I could well end up in high-profile development in the not-too-distant future."



A successful Kickstarter means *Carmageddon* is getting a new lease on life.



When you think of the legacy of FPSs, *GoldenEye* is the daddy.



TimeSplitters was the champion of split-screen gaming; we still miss it.

With a 30th anniversary, *Snowman* finally spreads Christmas cheer to iOS.

The Free Radical with a GoldenEye for console first-person shooters

ON... PROUDEST GAMING MOMENTS: "*GoldenEye*, *TimeSplitters 2*... more surprisingly, I'm proud of my latest game – *The Snowman And The Snowdog* – because it was a complete break from the past."

ON... THE ENDURING POPULARITY OF SAID CLASSICS: "I had always thought that people would eventually move on and stop talking about [*GoldenEye*], so it was kind of a surprise to me when I had the realisation that they might still remember [it] in another 15 years."

ON... HAVING A CERTAIN REPUTATION: "When we were starting up Free Radical and subsequently launching our first games, it was definitely useful to be able to say 'we are more than half of the team that made *GoldenEye*'."

ON... THE DEVELOPING GAMES TODAY: "I don't expect Crash Lab to only make games in one particular genre. It's understandable that people who liked our past work would want to see more of the same, but it wouldn't be useful to change our approach... because good games only get made when you're working on something that you enjoy – and we don't enjoy shooters as much as we used to."



NAME: STEVE ELLIS
PAST WORK: Rare, Free Radical Design, Crytek UK
CURRENT WORK: Crash Lab
NOTABLE RELEASES: GoldenEye 007, Perfect Dark, TimeSplitters, TimeSplitters 2, TimeSplitters: Future Perfect, Second Sight, The Snowman And The Snowdog

ON... KICKSTARTER AND CROWDFUNDING: "What happens when a Kickstarter project burns through all of its money without the project reaching completion? I'd be surprised if we don't see a lot of examples of that."

ON... THE FUTURE: "I'm hoping spend some time prototyping this year. I haven't decided what, but it probably won't be like anything I've done before, and it may end up going nowhere. We'll see."

FROM BIOSHOCK TO GONE HOME:

What happens when three BioShock developers decide to quit their jobs, move into a house together in Portland, Oregon and develop a pure exploration game? You get Gone Home – and a chance to unravel the mystery of your missing family

Narrative has always shared an interesting relationship with videogames. While most mediums are capable of delivering a story with varying degrees of success, it is videogames where players have been handed the tools to craft their very own narrative experiences.

Not that developers have been particularly hasty to hand us those tools. When push comes to shove, narrative is always at the mercy of gameplay. In this past generation especially, the link between the two has become increasingly disconnected. Look towards the eight-plus hours of cut-scenes found in *Metal Gear Solid 4* as an example of games leaning too heavily on the influence of Hollywood.

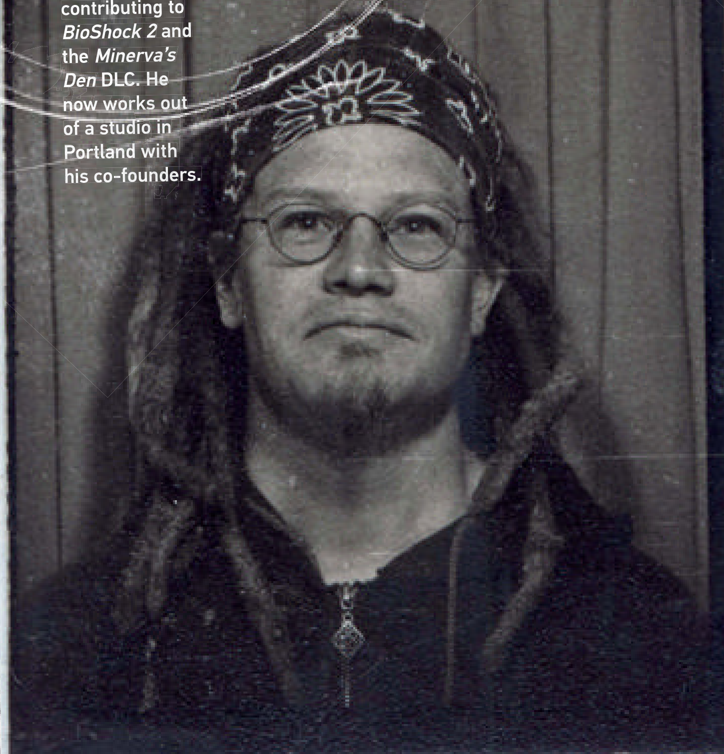
Thankfully, we have seen subtler forms of storytelling emerge in recent years. We've all encountered environmental storytelling in some form, but it usually exists alongside an already established world – the holodisks in *Fallout 3*, manic scrawlings found throughout *Portal* and the audio tapes in *BioShock* are used to bring further depth for players who want be feel completely immersed.

Regardless of the methods employed to tell a story, mainstream games almost always tend to rely on violence to drive the narrative forward. Whether it's butchering junkie inhabitants in the underwater city in *BioShock* with a wrench or incinerating the robotic heart of a conflicted AI in *Portal*, games always return to violence as a method of motivation. Surprising really, when you consider that videogames are arguably the most expressive form of entertainment – can they not create a purely narrative experience?

It's been left to the independent market, then, to explore storytelling without the threat of violence staring at you from every shadow. In fact, titles like *Dear Esther* and *Journey* have told stories in a way that no other medium could ever hope to accomplish, and the Fullbright Company's debut game *Gone Home* is looking to take it one step further.

Unlike other contemporary exploration games, *Gone Home* is depending on familiarity to seduce players. Our lives aren't set in stone. Relationships are made and broken, your siblings grow up and life moves on without you. Usually, returning home after a lengthy time away is a joyous occasion, full of awkward





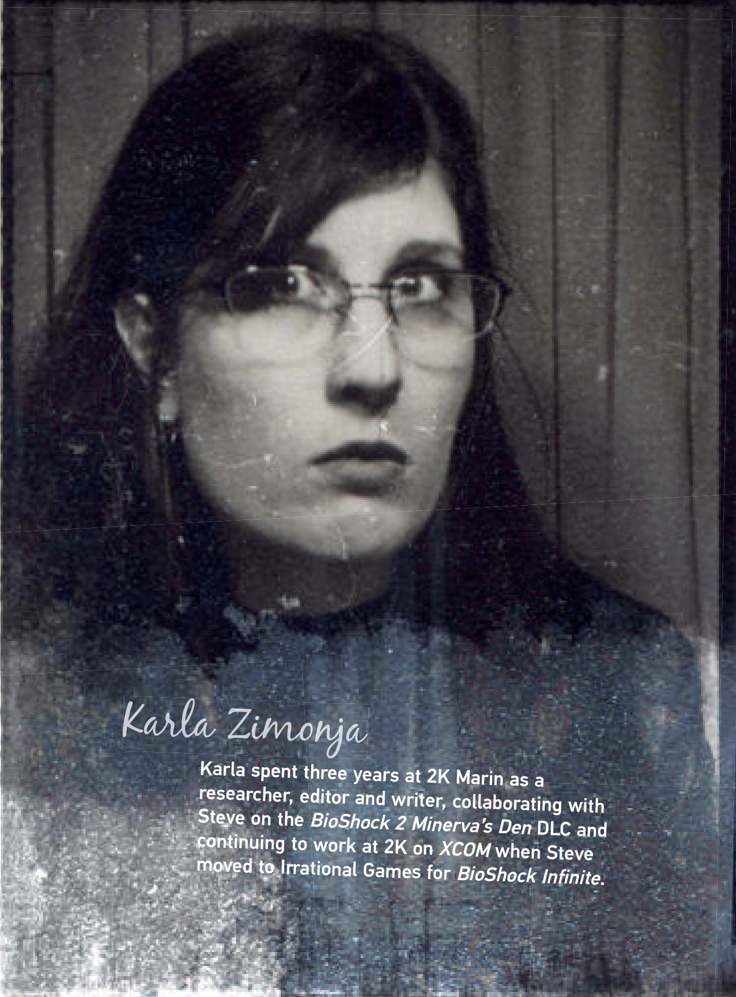
Johnnemann Nordhagen

Johnnemann previously worked at 2K Marin as a programmer, contributing to *BioShock 2* and the *Minerva's Den* DLC. He now works out of a studio in Portland with his co-founders.



Kate Craig

Kate joined the *Gone Home* project in August 2012, handling the environmental art duties. Previously a map illustrator at VRX Studios, she currently operates from here home in Canada.



Karla Zimonja

Karla spent three years at 2K Marin as a researcher, editor and writer, collaborating with Steve on the *BioShock 2 Minerva's Den* DLC and continuing to work at 2K on *XCOM* when Steve moved to Irrational Games for *BioShock Infinite*.

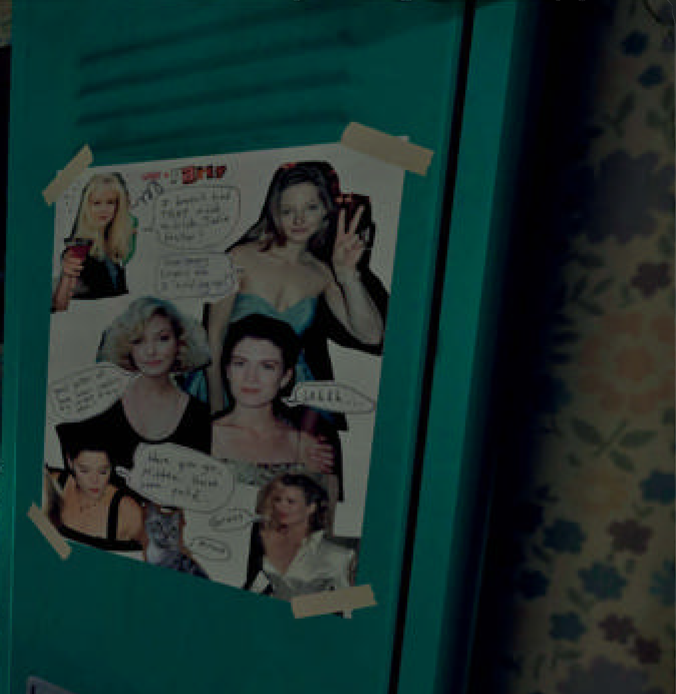


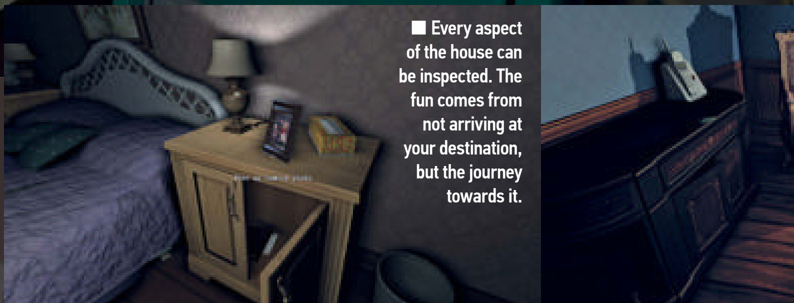
Steve Gaynor

Steve worked at TimeGate Studios on *F.E.A.R*, was lead writer at 2K Marin for the *BioShock 2 Minerva's Den* DLC and worked on *BioShock Infinite* before co-founding Fullbright.



■ Everything in the cupboard and the diary that we probably shouldn't have snooped through all reveal telling signs about your sister – you can't help but feel guilty about swanning off to Europe while she grew up all alone.





■ Every aspect of the house can be inspected. The fun comes from not arriving at your destination, but the journey towards it.

hugs and friendly conversation. Protagonist Katie, however, returns from a prolonged trip around Europe not to smiling faces, but to a dark and abandoned family house. Packing boxes adorn the hallway, the living room has the remnants of a quick departure and a note pinned to the front door from her sister asks her not to worry, but not to go looking for her either.

"It's a pure story exploration game," explains Steve Gaynor, an ex-*BioShock 2* developer and one of the co-founders of the Fullbright Company. "It's your job to explore the house, investigate it and really interrogate the environments to find out the story of who lived here and what happened to them."

The first steps through the house are a bizarre mixture of fear and suspense. Set in 1995, the Fullbright Company has lovingly restored a family house that gamers of a certain generation will instantly feel at home in. The gaudy wallpaper, the audacious furniture and messy scribbling of a teenager falling in love with grunge – Fullbright has created a love letter to our childhoods. At first, every shadow makes you jump and the creak of the floorboards makes your skin crawl, but a Mansion in Raccoon City this is not. In fact there isn't any combat, or even other people in *Gone Home* – it's "100% story exploration" as Steve would tell it. "Any house that you go into when nobody's home and just look around and find out about what kind of people live here, and what they are interested in and what happened to them in their lives – you can reconstruct the story from all the evidence that's there," he says, posing the question to **games™** before our hands-on, "What's the conflict that made this family leave?"

It's an interesting question, and one that is utterly enthralling to unravel. Almost every object in the house can be inspected. The fun, strangely enough, comes from finding something like a locked diary under your sister's bed and then rooting through rooms to find the combination – the secrets inside the diary reveal another little piece of the mystery. You quickly get to see what has happened in your absence, how your sister has grown up without you, your parents' marriage unravelling and all the dark family secrets that you're shielded from as a child.

Removing combat, puzzles and interaction is a risky move, so it's no surprise that Steve had to move into the independent space to explore this vision. Still, coming from working on the *BioShock* franchise, one that leans so heavily on environmental storytelling, why wasn't he getting his fix in the world of Rapture or above the clouds in New Columbia? For him, the transition from one of the biggest studios in the world to developing with three of his friends, two of which operate with him out of a studio in Portland, was an easy decision.

"For me, it was a really interesting arc of experience," says Steve, explaining that while he started as a level designer on *BioShock 2*, it wasn't long before he was given the chance to lead the *Minerva's Den* DLC project which kick-started his interest in smaller development cycles. "I was given the opportunity to be lead designer and writer of *Minerva's Den*. Just the feeling between those two experiences was very different. You go from doing something with 80 or 90 people in the office working on *BioShock 2*, to just a group that's actually small enough to all fit in the same area. [You can] just look over your shoulder and throw ideas around and have a very quick iteration process and really be aware of every single part of the entire project… everybody could be involved in this way that was very agile. It was cool to be involved with."

"It's your job to explore the house, investigate it to find out the story of who lived here and what happened to them"

It was the immediacy of *Minerva's Den* development that Steve fell in love with. The close relationships he built with his fellow staff and the level of control they had over everything from level to weapon design was a welcome change to working as part of a large corporate machine. As Steve was to discover later, moving back into full production at Irrational on *BioShock Infinite* was a culture shock.

"I went to Irrational and it was going back to that prior paradigm of being one developer who's responsible for one very specific part of a very big game, and feeling very isolated in the middle of that. Very disconnected in a lot of ways, 'cause like I was saying with *Minerva*, you kind of felt like you could be connected to every aspect of the experience, and then in a game as huge as *BioShock Infinite*, there's only very little you can actually get to

HAIKYO HOUSES

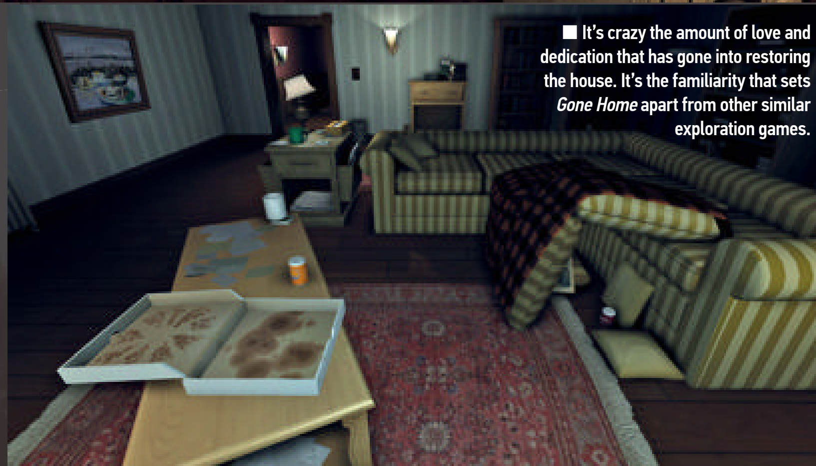
GONE HOME IS part inspired by *haikyo* houses, abandoned buildings in Japan that have been left untouched for many years. In particular, the 'Royal House' was a big inspiration for Steve and the Fullbright team – named so after the original explorer discovered jewellery and artefacts that linked this missing family to the Royal family. "It was this time capsule," explains Steve. "People had lived there for many years and then just seemingly, at some point nobody had come home. The house had never been torn down, no one had even remembered that it was there… it was fascinating."

Going through the family's possessions allowed the explorers to make a timeline of their lives and create their story. Though the explorers used resources like the internet and library records to assist the search, you'll have no such luck in *Gone Home*. Set in 1995, the internet and mobile phones aren't something you'd likely find in a family home – so instead you must use keen detective skills and an investigative eye to piece together the timeline. "For us, we wanted the entire story to be discoverable within the house itself," says Steve.





■ The house is completely empty and, save for a few tape recordings left by your sister, it's a mostly silent experience.



■ It's crazy the amount of love and dedication that has gone into restoring the house. It's the familiarity that sets *Gone Home* apart from other similar exploration games.

Narrative Gets Recognised

The Independent Games Festival [IGF] has finally recognised 'Excellence in Narrative' as a category, for which *Gone Home* has been selected as a finalist, alongside *Cart Life*, *Dys4ia*, *Kentucky Route Zero* and *Thirty Flights Of Loving*. "They're all really, really different," says Steve Gaynor. "They just all tell stories in really interesting ways."

touch," he reflects. Clearly a desire to get back to a more intimate design process was the only thing on Gaynor's mind.

"Professionally, to get back to that feeling that I had of *Minerva's Den* – like working with a small team, where you're all in the pit, all totally invested in the totality of the project – was just something I wanted to do again. That's why I reached out to Johnnemann Nordhagen and Karla Zimonja," he says, adding, "It's really exciting to be in that environment again. Where we're all invested in making this thing, and we can all give input and see it take shape together."

Unlike a lot of developers in the independent scene, the Fullbright Company benefits from sharing a lot of triple-A experience. Aside from working with Steve on *BioShock 2* and *Minerva's Den*, Johnnemann Nordhagen and Karla Zimonja continued to work with 2K on *XCOM* while he moved to Boston for *BioShock Infinite*. So it's curious then that the trio decided to work on *Gone Home* independently, instead of trying to take this to a publisher or existing studio. Though for Steve, after working on both sides of the industry, it's clear to him that the mainstream isn't ready for a purely narrative experience.

"We are all really grateful we working in triple-A for a number of years… because it taught us how to make games in a way that's effective. You learn a bunch of best practices of what to do and what not to do by example, where it's much safer to learn those lessons because your personal savings aren't on the line," he says with a nervous laugh, before continuing, "I learned a ton about the art of game design by working at 2K and Irrational, so I'm super-grateful for that, but also, we managed to save up enough money where we can make a game like *Gone Home* without having to find investors… we can make exactly the game we believe in."

Really that's the crux of the story. *Gone Home* is an independent vision where the three co-founders, and Kate Craig who later joined to handle the environmental art duties, don't have to bend to the will of a publisher. Steve has a tough time seeing any new ideas penetrating the mainstream in this generation, let alone a 100 per cent exploration game, with publishers less willing to take even small risks any more.

"I think the indie thing almost feels more viable these days in comparison," he laughs, before expanding his thoughts on publishers in the tough next generation marketplace. "The fortunes of big triple-A publishers are not in the greatest shape they've ever been in. If you're working on a big franchise property you don't have great job security.

"It's really tough to do something that is not a proven money-making genre. There is big money going around [and] the publishers that are funding this stuff are making bets… It's weirdly hard to get the publisher to make really small bets. They are saying, 'We need to have good confidence that this is going to be a good return of investment'. It's not even that it's non-violent, or not a shooter, it just isn't a tried and tested."

As for the Fullbright Company, it is happy being able to make the game to no one's expectations but its own. In fact, Steve isn't sure that the game could function if it were created in a more traditional manner. "*Gone Home*, even if you were going to make it at a more traditional studio structure, would still be a very small game. It would be hard to take this concept and blow it up into a $50 million budget… unless you changed it very fundamentally and said, 'Okay, actually there are going to be tons of characters walking around, and we will do motion capture, and it won't be just one house but a whole neighbourhood'. You could do that, but it wouldn't be the same game at all."

The Fullbright co-founders have no regrets about leaving Irrational and 2K – they are perfectly happy sharing a three-bedroom house in Portland, Oregon, keeping expenses as low as possible to pump everything into their project. At the end of the day, they are at the vanguard of an indie revolution that's only gaining steam as time passes. "The more indie is seen as being viable," says Steve, "the more people that see success stories, the more people are going to even consider taking a shot. You should take that opportunity while [you've] got it."



Reviews



90

Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance

It's time to slice and dice

THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest – we'd never let that happen, and besides you'd smell it a mile off. And finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact, they are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists, designed to enlighten, inform, and engage. The gospel according to **games™**.

94

98

102

104

106

123

AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or have we nailed it?

Let us know through the following channels:

facebook.com/gamesTM

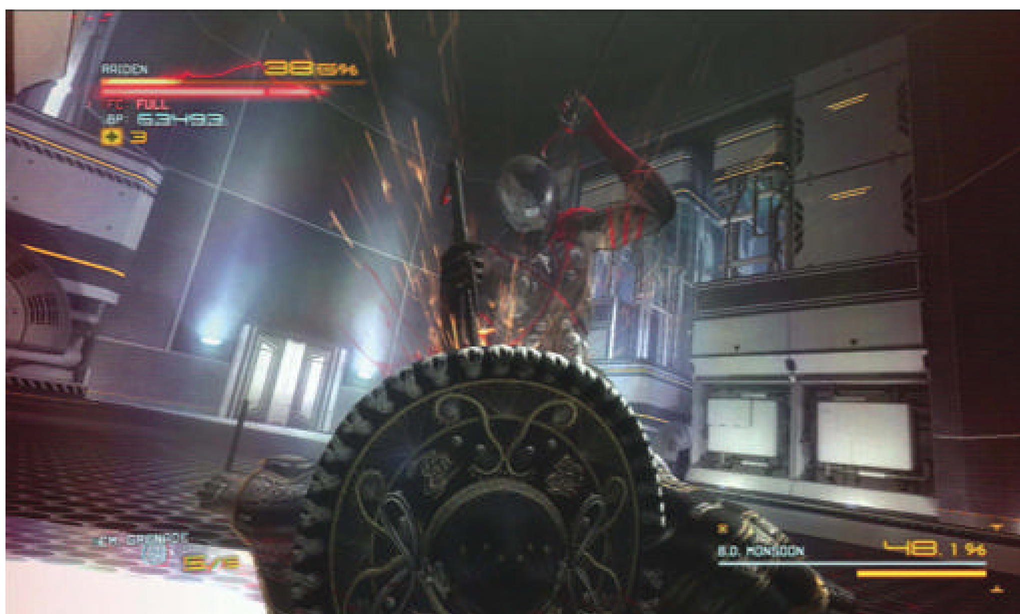
@gamesTMmag
#gamestmiswrong #gamestmisright

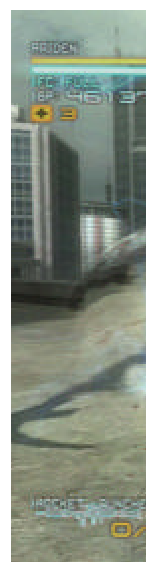
gplus.to/gamesTMmagazine

BLADE MODE IS CLOSER TO THE 'YOU ARE THE CONTROLLER' ETHOS THAN KINECT MANAGED

DRESS ME UP

When each level ends, you can customise Raiden. You can choose his weapon layout or also increase his stats (endurance, strength and so on), but also buy extra moves or new looks. Extra moves don't feel quite as essential here as in other third-person games of this ilk, simply because your initial moveset and Blade Mode is enough to see you through most encounters. However, customising your look is more fun than it sounds. Even though you can only choose from a few skins unlocked through play, some of them are brilliantly ridiculous – Raiden in a poncho and sombrero? Who's going to say no?





BEST SERVED COLD

Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
OTHER FORMATS: 360
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Konami
DEVELOPER: Platinum Games/Kojima Productions
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Left: Cleanly cutting through enemies seems like a novelty that will soon wear off, but it remains oddly satisfying through to the end.

Cut anything. Who knew two words could cause so much trouble? It was three years ago when *Metal Gear Solid: Rising* emerged with 'cut anything' as its core mechanic, tech demos showing Raiden slicing through watermelons, pillars and cars with lethal precision. Unknown to us, the same mechanic that made that tech demo such a tantalising prospect then became a huge burden, as Kojima Productions struggled to figure out exactly what it wanted its project to be. Stealth? Action? Story-driven? Open-ended? Games rarely suffer an identity crisis and stumble through development hell to happy endings (see *Duke Nukem Forever* and *Too Human*).

In the end, it became *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance*. Perhaps more importantly, it became a Platinum game. If you were to approach *Revengeance* without any knowledge of the development, you'd think this was a Platinum tribute to the *Metal Gear* series. Platinum's trademarks – punchy action, fluid animation, over-the-top design – are all pillars on which *Revengeance* is founded and the footloose speed rarely finds itself weighed down by stealth or lengthy CODEC conversations (both still present but relegated to background concerns).

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

SLICE AND DICE: Cutting through enemies and watching their body parts drift away in slow-motion fits in with Platinum's trademark frantic combat rather well.

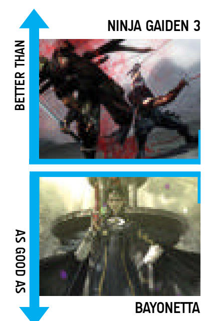
In fact, the only real sign that Kojima Productions had any involvement in this project comes from the story, which is the usual *Metal Gear* mix of philosophical pondering, overly dramatic dialogue and loopy sci-fi. As soon as you're introduced to characters called Jetstream Sam, Sundowner and Mongoose, *Metal Gear* fans will feel as though they've landed on familiar territory again.

As mentioned, there is a token nod to stealth. Most areas begin with enemies unaware of Raiden's presence and you *can* pick your way through areas using stealth kills and a healthy dose of patience. Yet the reason it's merely a token nod is that stealth is something you'll rarely bother with. On a practical level, it's hard to work out the



Left: Bosses are all a huge challenge, mostly because the only practical way to defend yourself is parrying, which means learning the timing and frequency of attacks.





Left: Though the game is liberal with gore, all these enemies are cyborgs. Even the human soldiers are cyborgs. Presumably an attempt to ensure this doesn't hit dreaded 'unrated' status in Japan, but worth noting regardless.

parameters of *Revengeance*'s particular stealth system, as you can never really establish how far guards can see, nor which angles leave you safe from searching eyes, and Raiden doesn't have moves that allow him to crawl, or crouch, or hug walls. So there might be stealth but *Revengeance* clearly isn't designed that way. But more importantly, on a fun level, there's a bigger reason stealth will be ignored.

It's because combat is so satisfying, so effortlessly stylish, that to go down any other route seems like a huge waste. Unsurprising given this has come from the same studio that has brought us the likes of *Bayonetta* and *Vanquish*; surprising that an official *Metal Gear* game can prove to be such a happy home to the same style of chaotic, frantic combat.

Combat is clearly the star here, with Blade Mode the most original concept. It's the reduction of the 'cut anything' ethos to a single button, slowing the world to a crawl while Raiden slices through anything before him. Translated into gameplay terms (and presumably what's practical in terms of design), cut anything just means cut-through-enemies-and-environmental-objects. It's *Okami* with a razor-sharp sword rather than a paintbrush, flicks of the right analogue stick swiping the sword where instructed, enemies drifting apart in slow-motion in the angular cuts from where you sliced through. It adds a physicality to the combat that is rarely seen outside of fighting games played with arcade sticks. It's certainly closer to a 'you are the controller' ethos than Kinect ever managed.

Platinum's biggest challenge most likely would have been accommodating such a precise system in its traditionally frenzied combat that rarely affords players the luxury of time. This is where the studio deserves huge credit. At first, your main use for Blade Mode will be as a wild death blow, slicing enemies apart in slow-motion and revealing their cybernetic spines, which you can grab and crush to recharge your health. It's the latter that forces you to figure out how to work Blade Mode into your routine. *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* is a tough (if short) game and the difficulty is such that you have to grab free health whenever you can. It's a well-balanced system.

Yet, in-game progression and confidence inspire you to find surprising new and creative uses for Blade Mode. As enemies grow in size, you find yourself having to use Blade Mode to hack away at their limbs simply to reduce the arsenal of moves with which they harass you. It also opens up the gruesome sights of soldiers without legs crawling towards you, giant cyborgs ramming you with their head as you've hacked off their arms. Furthermore, you can carve up projectiles – rockets, grenades and knives – and you can also slice away at environmental objects supporting lofty enemies.

FAQs

Q. IS IT MORE PLATINUM OR KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS?
It definitely plays more like a Platinum title, falling in line with the design ethos of *Bayonetta* or *Vanquish*.

Q. IS IT DIFFICULT?
Yes. The general gameplay is easy enough, but boss battles force you to learn the patterns so you can parry (and defend) effectively.

Q. IS THE STORYLINE CANON?
Yes, although it's not essential to have *Metal Gear* knowledge to enjoy the story (or the game itself).



Below: Although levels are mostly a series of 'combat arenas', there are other sequences that help link them together, such as running up the side of buildings while avoiding missiles, as seen here.





Blade Mode is welded to a combat system that is Platinum through and through. Raiden's moveset appears to be based around the standard normal attack/strong attack trope, but you soon realise the system goes much further. Defeating bosses unlocks their 'unique weapon', which can be equipped and used with the strong attack button. Further moves for these weapons can be bought and this is where the fun and experimentation with the combat is found outside of Blade Mode, especially as each weapon offers something different – the electric sais stun and pull Raiden in close, while the pincer swords



Right: *Revengeance* is all about the combat: a kanji will appear on screen to let you know when to strike the finishing blow of a crazy sword-swiping combination.

AND IT SPARKLES WITH THE SAME CONFIDENCE AND VERVE IT WOULD HAVE DONE HAD KOJIMA BEEN AT THE HELM



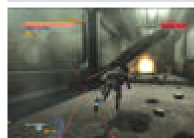
Below: Each boss you defeat gives up his or her unique weapon, which can then be equipped and use yourself. This one is the pincer sword, which is extremely slow but leaves a bloody mess whenever it's used.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

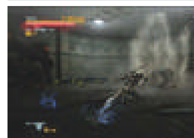
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

2 HOURS



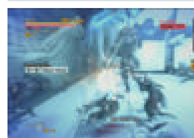
You're just starting to understand how to use Blade Mode and see the bonkers way that Platinum Studios has put the levels (or rather, the small combat arenas) together.

4 HOURS



Unlocking unique weapons has taught you how to get the most out of Raiden's abilities and how to match up against the variety of enemies, from these lumbering beasts to giant mechs.

2 DAYS



With the game itself over in around 6-8 hours, you'll then push yourself to return for S ranks, parrying bosses without taking a scratch and completing it as quickly as you can.



VR MISSIONS

Although there isn't too much room to explore in *Revengeance*'s tight, quick levels, there are item boxes tucked away in the nooks and crannies that award Raiden with sub-weapons (grenades, rocket launchers, stingers etc) or health items. More importantly, you can find VR Missions, which unlock short challenges that take place in an alternate world similar to… well, *Metal Gear Solid: VR Missions*. It adds a further impetus to explore the environment and the difficulty of later challenges makes it worth taking the time to hunt them out, particularly as the game itself clocks in at around six to eight hours (though this will hugely depend on your player skill, as learning how to parry boss attacks is almost essential to defeating them).



are huge, slow, cumbersome but powerful weapons, and so on.

It's not just attacking. Raiden's main means of defence is using a parry system (attacking just as he's about to be hit) and ninja run (Raiden uses his sword to deflect bullets), with red and yellow flashes indicating the class of move that's inbound. There is no block and no dodge. It's a brave design decision, but one that works and further builds on *Revengeance*'s identity. Just like attacking, even defence comes down to deft use of Raiden's sword over everything else.

The culmination of this combat system comes in the boss battles. Platinum Games and Kojima Productions famously flex their muscles when it comes to eccentric, over-the-top showdowns, showcasing a love for eye-catching design over convention, and *Revengeance* is no exception. Without spoiling too much, again, you are again asked to find surprising uses for Blade Mode with each encounter. One boss is protected by explosive shields that only give way when you slice precisely between them, while another throws tanks and helicopters at you.

If there's a lot of talk about the combat, it's because that's what *Revengeance is*. Levels are divided into combat arenas, with invisible walls stopping progress until all enemies in the area have been defeated and a rank awarded. That might irk some but it shouldn't. It's just another sign that *Revengeance* is an unashamed, straight up, balls-out action game that has Raiden at its core. It's just one that's been dressed up with a *Metal Gear* theme, with plenty of deft touches throughout to tickle the nostalgia glands of fans.

Sounds effects from the alert siren to the low health beeping have been lifted straight from previous titles. The girlie posters are an obvious nod to the ones found in *Metal Gear Solid 2*'s lockers. There are tributes to the development of *Revengeance*, such as the hidden room full of watermelons (slice one open and you'll summon huge, lumbering enemies). Saving is done via CODEC. Most pleasingly, *Revengeance* is a game teeming with Easter eggs and secrets – the giant watermelon, the cat, the guard hiding in the cardboard box, and more that will emerge in the weeks and months ahead. The environments may feel a little barren, but the abundance of secrets inject a personality and help flesh out the game around the excellent combat.

The main thing to take away from this review is this. For all the development trouble, for all the doubts, for all the talk about what *Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance* could have been – it's now a Platinum game and it sparkles with the same confidence and verve it would have done had Kojima been at the helm. It's an absolute joy to play and is almost certainly the best *Metal Gear* game released this gen.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

NINJA RUN: It seems like a sprint button but its utility as a defensive move and in helping Raiden link combos makes it far more fun and, more importantly, useful than sprint moves have any right to be.

VERDICT 9/10

QUITE SIMPLY, ONE OF THE BEST METAL GEAR TITLES

WE'VE ONLY JUST BEGUN

Dead Space 3 is clearly a game that is meant to be played on Hard difficulty or above. However, it's only after the game is beaten that its really interesting challenges open up. The expected New Game+ offers the traditional option to start over with all of your previously collected items and weapons. However, three additional modes are also unlocked that drastically alter the way the game is played. In Classic mode, only weapons from previous *Dead Space* games can be constructed and there's no option for co-op. Elsewhere, Pure Survival prevents enemies dropping health or ammo, forcing you to craft everything at workbenches, while Hardcore mode adds permadeath. It's an imaginative way to promote additional play-throughs.



Right: While the larger, boss-like Necromorphs are presumably intended to represent the pinnacle of the species' evolution, many of them lack imagination.



VISCERAL PROVES ITS BIGGEST CHALLENGE IS LIVING UP TO ITS OWN HIGH STANDARDS

Dead Space 3

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS3
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360, PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: Visceral Games
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN: RESIDENT EVIL 6

WORSE THAN: DEAD SPACE 2



Isaac Clarke is a man with many troubles. The rent on his tiny studio apartment is overdue. His detritus-strewn home is in need of a visit from someone with a working knowledge of a mop and bucket. It appears to have been quite some time since Isaac was gainfully employed and his next-door neighbour's incessantly vociferous canine keeps him awake at night. Things are little better on the relationship front, where he's swapped the hallucinations of a murderous dead girlfriend for the common heartache of an estranged living one.

Yes, Isaac Clarke is a man with many troubles, but at the outset of *Dead Space 3* they are humdrum problems to which we can all relate. Having survived two campaigns in which the twisted power of Red Markers transformed those around him into grotesque Necromorphs, Isaac appears to have completed his own metamorphosis into something worse: a regular guy being ground down by the mundane drama of everyday life.

Fortunately, the preoccupation with Isaac's living space is short-lived and a visit from EarthGov soldiers gives him something on which to focus his splintered mind. Despite some initial reticence, it's not long before Isaac is once more jetting off into the dead of space, chasing the promise of finding the alien Marker home-world and ending the Necromorph plague.

Aiding his decision to accept this unsavoury mission is the possibility of being reunited with Ellie Langford, the woman who saved his life but lost an eye in *Dead Space 2*. So begins a headlong escape from a city that is quickly tearing itself apart thanks to the sudden appearance of Marker-worshipping Unitologists and a local population that is being subjected to the gruesome Necromorph effect.

The opening hours of *Dead Space 3* see Visceral Games break the franchise free of its traditional dark corridors and attempt to establish its narrative on a grander scale. Atop the recognisable qualities of the *Dead Space* series, Visceral piles a handful of new gameplay concepts. Some of these additions work well, but others clash with the established building blocks of this exemplary action-horror franchise.

New to the fold is a varied cast of characters, each of whom has their own motivations and issues. By the time that Isaac and co have descended to the frozen surface of Tau Volantis to search for the Black Marker, petty squabbles have broken out and an antagonistic relationship is developing between Isaac and Captain Robert Norton. These relationships provide moments of human drama woven through the more straightforward and deadly threat of the Necromorphs. They also provide some lighter moments of comic relief as Isaac and Norton butt heads over ideals, leadership and the size of their plasma cutters.

While the people that form part of Isaac's ragtag group serve to enhance the *Dead Space 3* experience, those that fight on the side of the fanatical Unitologists are less welcome. The religious zealots want to activate the Black Marker so that it might fulfil its ultimate purpose of convergence and so they take a dim view of Isaac's role as Marker-destroyer. It's when Isaac is battling these human adversaries that *Dead Space 3*'s combat is at its least satisfying and this is particularly noticeable during an extended section towards the end of the game. The addition of a rudimentary cover mechanic means Isaac can now crouch behind level furniture and take potshots at human soldiers from a distance. This adds variety to the nature of the combat, especially when both Necromorphs and Unitologists show up at the same time, but it also flies in the face of Visceral's excellent work in creating exciting and panic-inducing close-quarters combat.

Firefights against human opponents lack the repulsive intimacy and heart-thumping terror of going toe-to-toe with the Necromorphs and rob *Dead Space 3* of some of the series' trademark claustrophobia. Crouched awkwardly behind makeshift cover while waiting to take

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

WHAT'S NORMAL? Diverse player-bases make it increasingly tricky to pitch Normal difficulty. Visceral could have used player performance in the prologue chapter to suggest a suitable level.

DEAD SPACE 3 SEES THE IDENTITY OF THE SERIES AT A CROSSROADS – IT'S A PRIME EXAMPLE OF A FRANCHISE MID-EVOLUTION

Below: *Dead Space 3* features the biggest cast of friendly NPCs of the series. It's not blowing the lid off the plot to suggest that they may not all make it to the end of the game in perfect health.

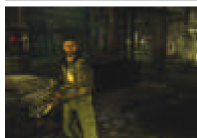


Above: The frozen wastes of Tau Volantis offer plenty of opportunity for Necromorphs to burst from the snow. The outdoor scares are not as effective as when inside, but Visceral was still able to catch us unawares on several occasions.

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

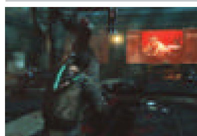
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

3 HOURS



You've left behind Isaac's pit of an apartment and escaped the city just as the neighbourhood goes to hell. After a bumpy ride, you have landed on the icy surface of Tau Volantis.

10 HOURS



You've crafted several weapons and picked your favourites for tackling the Necromorph infestation. If you're playing on Normal difficulty, you have approximately 500 rounds of ammo to spare.

20 HOURS



The story and optional missions have been completed, the lacklustre final boss has been defeated and the credits have rolled. It's time to explore the myriad New Game+ options.

a shot threatens to turn *Dead Space* into something that it feels it was never meant to be and that it doesn't particularly excel at. Fortunately, these sections don't crop up too often and the unsavoury notion of gun-toting Necromorphs is mercifully sparsely used and short-lived.

The ups and downs of the increased human presence typify Visceral's experimentation in other areas, too. Take the overhauled weapon-crafting system, which for the most part is an absolute joy. The ability to bolt together constituent parts of the imaginative arsenal means if you long for the reassuring hum of acid-coated Ripper blades but also want the option to flambé your adversaries with the same gun, you're well catered for.

Visceral encourages experimentation in this area by replacing the intermittent reward of fully formed weapons with the steady drip-feed of schematics and upgrade components. This entices you back to the workbench to switch out parts, modifiers and circuits to see how different components complement one another. There's even a separate weapon-crafting arena available from the main menu, where budding weapon-smiths can tinker to their hearts' content before testing out the results on some Necromorphs.

The materials required to facilitate this are collected from downed enemies and small, automated Scavenger Bots that Isaac can deploy. While you can also buy component parts and weapons packs via micro-transactions, this is altogether unnecessary thanks to the amount of scrap material on offer. However, it's here that a problem with Visceral's eagerness to please the trigger-happy rears its head. The biggest concern regarding inventory management on normal difficulty is not the scarcity of supplies but the abundance of them: we finished our first playthrough with a game-balance-busting 1,000 rounds of universal ammo stashed in the safe.

As well as providing the biggest clue that *Dead Space 3* should be tackled on hard difficulty from the outset, this embarrassment of riches also impacts other key areas of the game. In Isaac's first two outings it was necessary to slow enemies with the stasis power in order to take a breath, reload and carefully aim shots for maximum effectiveness. Here you can instead blast away to your heart's content, with only one particularly fast subset of Necromorphs forcing the use of stasis to effectively line up a shot.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

ARSENAL ASSEMBLY: Dispensing with the notion of new weapons as gameplay rewards, Visceral has created a satisfying system in which your arsenal is dictated and created by you.

Similarly, despite Isaac's advice to his fellow survivors that they use the kinesis power to snap the pointy bits from downed Necromorphs and propel them at their disfigured brethren, the near infinite supply of ammo makes it possible to entirely forgo kinesis as a combat aid. This only changes in the closing chapters of the game, where stasis and kinesis are boosted by environmental factors that significantly boost

Below: Isaac and Carver's relationship gets off to a shaky start, with their introduction to one another seeing Carver pointing a gun at Isaac's head. However, they're destined to become firm friends and thankfully there's no chest-bumping.





ME, MYSELF AND I

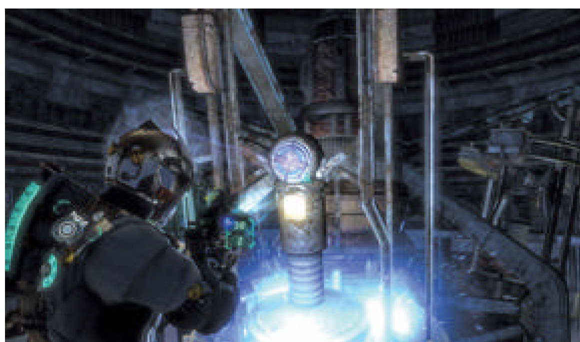
Sadly, online co-op play was not available for our review build. It comes in the form of drop-in/out as one player assumes the role of Sgt John Carver. Three co-op-specific missions exist throughout the game and Carver occasionally experiences a dementia effect, in which he must battle his inner demons while Clarke fights to keep him safe in the real world. Seen only in fits and starts in single-player, it's difficult to judge how successfully his character progression pans out. However, lone players should have been made to feel that Carver's presence enhances the entire experience, instead of being reminded that that they're missing out on a piece of the story.

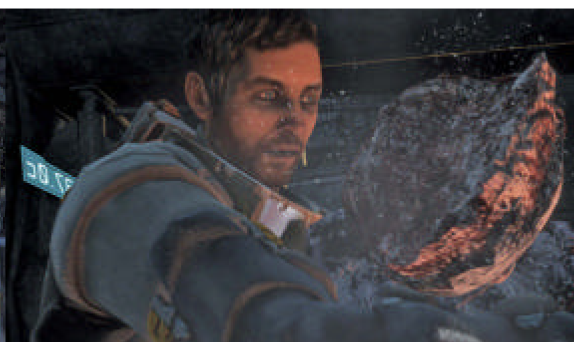
Left: Obtaining new suits feels less of an event than in previous games. Most, like the Arctic Suit, are purely functional. The option to customise them to the same degree as the weapons would have been welcome.





Right: Despite the new setting, a number of gameplay set pieces are reused, such as Isaac's headlong flights through space.





Above: The Waster is a new Necromorph type that has largely retained its human form thanks to the freezing conditions of Tau Volantis. That is, until you dismember one and new protrusions and mutations burst through its frozen flesh. Lovely.

the power of both abilities. This turns them into the easy option for fighting off your misshapen adversaries and threatens to render moot your lovingly crafted weapon set. It feels as though Visceral is seeking to compensate for having neutered stasis and kinesis up to that point, while simultaneously guarding against the possibility that the freedom it has afforded you with weapon crafting might have resulted in you being equipped with weapons not suited for the run-in to the finale.

Difficulty imbalances aside, Visceral's work in environmental design and character development has come on apace and it still excels at lulling you into a false sense of security and then hitting you with a moment of panic. As in the previous games, suspense is maintained by Visceral's ability to subvert your expectations and so, just when it seems that a Necromorph must surely burst forth from a wall cavity, it doesn't. This clever toying with your nerves is enough to have you walking almost everywhere with your weapon raised, which makes it easier to appreciate a well-timed scare from a source that you'd subconsciously written off as safe.

The audio design is instrumental to this. The scuttle of bone on metal or a sharp, contorted screech has you straining your ears into the silence that follows. Irrespective of your burgeoning arsenal, it's enough to unnerve you even when the threat is not delivered upon. Outside in the more open, external environments of Tau Volantis, Visceral opts for a different tactic. Robbed of an effective means of scaring you aurally, the designers instead choose to artificially create a close environment with the occasional white-out, which allows *Dead Space 3*'s new Necromorph types to lurch out of the blizzard. The troublesome Wasters are particularly persistent and their ability to further mutate after being dismembered elicits feelings of both disgust and a steely resolve to put them down for good.

AS BEFORE, VISCERAL MAINTAINS SUSPENSE WITH ITS ABILITY TO SUBVERT YOUR EXPECTATIONS

Above: Such is the variety of the constructible weapon set that it's entirely possible that you'll never lay your hands on the weapon wielded here. The beauty of this is that you'll likely have something more suited to your own taste.

FAQs

Q: IS ISAAC STILL CRAZY?
A: No, actually, he's become a remarkably well-rounded individual who no longer thinks his dead girlfriend is trying to kill him.

Q: HE'S WITH ELLIE, THEN?
A: Sadly, not. According to his own assessment he's pushed her away on account of being "permanently broken". Poor chap.

Q: HAS HE ANY FRIENDS?!
A: He has some new associates, put it that way. Unfortunately, being around Isaac Clarke tends to be bad for people's health.

While weapon crafting is perhaps the most obvious nod to Isaac's role as an engineer, it is not the only one. A handful of puzzles revolve around balancing voltage, hacking electrical locks, completing circuits and coaxing ancient, alien machinery back to life. Such moments slow Isaac's evolution to fully fledged space marine and set up some tense set-pieces where puzzles must be completed under duress, as Necromorphs convene on his prone position.

This change of pace is supported by a number of optional side missions of varying length. These offer Visceral the opportunity to experiment yet further with the structure and narrative exposition of the *Dead Space* universe. While not all of them hit the same memorable high standard, one or two offer unique highlights, such as the introduction of an offbeat character who wouldn't feel too out of place in a *BioShock* game. Another, on the remote icy wastes of Tau Volantis, explores the importance of keeping a well-stocked larder and what happens when it runs dry. While others are simply glorified loot runs with the promise of a shiny new schematic at the end, almost all of them add something to the experience. From a macabre narrative note to a nod to the wider *Dead Space* fiction, all are worth the additional time required to explore them.

On balance, *Dead Space 3* sees the identity of the series at a crossroads and is a prime example of a franchise mid-evolution. With *Dead Space 2* Visceral expanded upon the scope of the original game and perfected its oppressive atmosphere, but in doing so it set a new standard for every developer working in the survival-horror genre, including itself. Its follow-up adds multiple new concepts, some of which work while others undo some of its previous progress. The handful of boss fights in *Dead Space 3* are particularly forgettable, while the narrative occasionally lacks the courage of its convictions and the end-game reveal is a little too ludicrous to take seriously. However, where the new concepts work, they add to the solid core and are enhanced by Visceral's excellent pacing and its impeccable audio and visual design work, not to mention what remains the best HUD design in all of videogames. *Dead Space 3* a worthwhile addition to the series, but throughout it feels like Visceral is simultaneously trying to broaden the appeal of its flagship series while casting around for where to take it next.

VERDICT 8/10
A NOT ENTIRELY SUCCESSFUL MUTATION

GAME OVER MAN, GAME OVER!

Aliens: Colonial Marines

All things considered, time has been surprisingly good to the Xenomorphs. Though the franchise continues to dilute under waves of sequels, prequels and shameless tie-ins, it's the haunting memories of Ridley Scott's *Alien* and the adrenaline thrills of James Cameron's *Aliens* that has us hopelessly returning for more – we are but gluttons for disappointment.

Here's the thing – *Aliens: Colonial Marines* should be the game that restores faith in the beloved franchise. Promoted as the 'true sequel' to James Cameron's *Aliens*, it thrusts the player into the boots of Corporal Christopher Winter, a Colonial Marine who is tasked with investigating the USS Sulaco in search of Ellen Ripley and the rest of the marines who were dispatched to LV-426.

It all sounds rather good, doesn't it? We've been waiting far too long to explore the remnants of Hadley's Hope, to sulk along the haunted passageways of the Sulaco and, of course, the chance to stick it to some Xenos with a powerloader. While *Aliens: Colonial Marines* lets you do all of these things, it doesn't let you do them particularly well. What begins as a welcomed and sometimes mesmerising return to the planet that shaped science fiction quickly settles into a routine of frightening mediocrity.

Stalking through the scorched streets of Hadley's Hope with the throbbing pulse of the motion tracker for company, it's wonderfully compelling. *Colonial Marines* has no trouble finding the pace to quickly ramp tension levels through the roof, it just doesn't manage to successfully settle on it like Cameron's masterpiece achieved so effortlessly. For every success *Colonial Marines* has with recreating an atmosphere and thrusting us into lovingly realised locale, it's quickly overshadowed by the numerous cracks that begin to show when the fighting begins.

The encounters have no spark, no danger. Your skin doesn't crawl as the motion tracker sparks to life, which is perhaps down to the way the conflicts are presented throughout. At no point are you ever given a real reason to fear the Aliens; after all, they are pests and you're part of the intergalactic extermination crew. For everything Gearbox could have done with the licence, it has patched together a pretty mundane FPS. Any fans of *Call Of Duty* will certainly see the familiarity, but not the polish.

What's more terrifying than the encounters with the Xenos is how closely *Colonial Marines* echoes Rebellion's *Alien Vs Predator*. Like its cousin, it is all too happy to lean back on convention, rather than letting you sink your teeth into the licence. The game is all too quick to funnel you into gauntlet runs, hurtling you from point A to point B in a hail of bullets with a suspension of the creeping tension it should be feeding the player. It's a shame, because when *Colonial Marines* pushes you into last stands with your back up against the wall, we get a glimpse of what could have been.

You versus a room of Xenomorphs with nothing but a shotgun and an abundance

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

MOTION TRACKER: The bleeping of the motion tracker every time a Xenomorph scuttles through the shadows is haunting – just as it was in the classic movies.

COMING FROM THE HOUSE THAT BORE BROTHERS IN ARMS AND BORDERLANDS, YOU EXPECT A CERTAIN LEVEL OF QUALITY FROM GEARBOX, WHICH COLONIAL MARINES FAILS TO DELIVER AT EVEN ITS MOST FUNDAMENTAL LEVEL



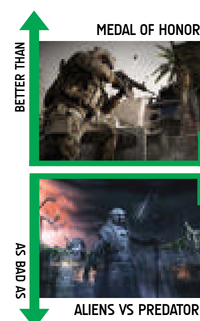
DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PlayStation 3, PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: Gearbox Software
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2 (2-8)
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

Below: *Aliens: Colonial Marines* is a very dark and muddy game. Even the supplied torch doesn't add much brightness to the levels.



Left: Regenerating health is out; health packs, ammunition and body armour are back in. Red barrels go boom again and it feels like playing a shooter from ten years ago.



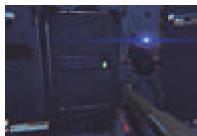
LEVELLING UP

Considering the game's ease it's almost a rudimentary inclusion, but *Colonial Marines* lets you level up throughout the game to unlock customisable features for your guns. You can unlock different underlings for your assault rifles, switching in grenades for human antagonists and a flamethrower for the aliens can be done on the fly, while you can also add skins to the guns to help differentiate your character in multiplayer and co-op. You level up by completing challenges throughout the campaign, though we hit a bit of a wall when the game insisted on us getting up close and personal with the Xenos and butting them with our rifles. Bullets work a treat – melee not so much.

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

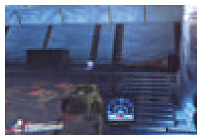
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

20 MINS



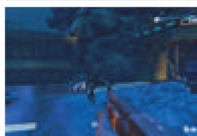
Running through the USS Sulaco is every bit as tense as we thought it would be. We've already slaughtered plenty of Xenomorphs, times are good.

5 HOURS



We've already seen most of what the game has to offer. The story has begun to tail off and the graphics are starting to grate. Still pretty fun blasting Xenomorphs, though.

1 DAY



The campaign is finally wrapped up and any remaining time spent on LV-426 is going to be spent hunting legendary weapons and looking for the hidden dogtags.



of ammunition can be exhilarating, especially when the aliens begin to overwhelm your position. It's twitch gameplay, not at its finest – not by a long shot – but it's certainly enjoyable all the same. Sadly these brief moments only serve to highlight the frightening linearity to the rest of *Colonial Marines*, because for the majority of play it's the worst kind of corridor shooter.

The weapons are lovingly recreated, though lack the punch you'd expect. In a world where *Battlefield 3* makes you feel like you're head deep in the battle, the soft feedback from the Pulse Rifle and Smartguns really lacks the gut-punch you would expect from future weaponry.

The Aliens themselves are a swift and nimble threat, crawling out of holes in the walls and ceiling, though they never utilise the freedom well enough. The enemy almost exclusively funnels towards you, hoping to crush with overwhelming numbers instead of clear tactical advantages. It's again, just another disappointment. For a race of the deadliest predators in the galaxy, they aren't overly proficient at their craft.

Even the human Weyland-Yutani mercenaries that you encounter make no attempt to flank or outmanoeuvre you. The AI is universally sloppy, and we lost count of the number of times we were killed by an enemy who slipped through the game world into an undiscoverable dimension. It becomes even more frustrating when you ramp the difficulty up to 'Ultimate Badass' mode, when even a single headshot can set you back a way towards a checkpoint. Somewhat disappointingly, the Weyland-Yutani mercs tend pose more of a threat than the Xenos – with a few shots from an assault rifle taking you down far faster than any other threats that you're likely to find in the depths of Hadley's Hope.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

THRILLS: Considering the licence in play, it's a shame that Gearbox never manages to capture the thrills or excitement of James Cameron's feral take on the franchise.

Your AI partners are similarly thwarted, often becoming more of an obstruction rather than aiding you in combat, happily wandering into crossfire – utterly frustrating when you consider that one of the brutes spends the entire game wielding a Smartgun while we're stuck with the basic arsenal. The AI is terribly archaic across the board, and certainly not up to the standard of its peers.

NEW WAYS TO DIE

While *Aliens: Colonial Marines* does its best to stay faithful to the franchise, Gearbox has taken this opportunity to introduce new Xenomorph enemy types into the world. You have lurkers that hide in the shadows and are quick to strike when you let your guard down; spitters that cling to walls and hurl acid at you; and big hulking Xenos that charge your position, knocking you off your feet. The new enemy classes are all well and good, but a forced stealth mission through a sewer halfway through the campaign utilises Xenos that spring to life at the response of noise. Crawling slowly through a drag sewer, only having to stop ever 30 seconds was not exactly our ideal way to spend a session of gaming.

FAQs

Q. WORTH THE WAIT?
We've been anticipating this one for close to seven years, but sadly *Colonial Marines* fails to live up to its promise.

Q. WHAT WENT WRONG?
While Gearbox has had great success with the crazy fun found in *Borderlands*, it looks like that's where all the spare creativity went.

Q. ANY REDEEMING FACTORS?
For one very brief corridor we got control of a Smartgun and got to blast 30+ aliens in seconds. It was awesome.

In fact, much of the experience feels archaic. Gearbox has cut back on regenerating health that is found in most modern FPS titles, and reintroduced health packs and body armour. We love retro habits as much as the next guy, but in a game that should be cinematic by nature, the health-pack hunt feels quite arbitrary.

Of all the things *Colonial Marines* lacks, it's perhaps the lack of a cinematic edge that hits hardest. The game's plot is near impenetrable for those not completely clued up on *Alien* lore, and even for the initiated it's a tough ride. The narrative moves at such briskness, you would be

THE ALIENS THEMSELVES ARE A SWIFT AND NIMBLE THREAT, CRAWLING OUT OF HOLES IN THE WALLS AND CEILING, THOUGH THEY NEVER UTILISE THE FREEDOM WELL ENOUGH

Left: For some reason, you spend just as much time gunning down humans as you do Aliens. It seems hunting one of the most notorious predators in the galaxy wasn't enough.





Right: There's an inherent thrill to fighting such legendary sci-fi creatures, but Gearbox fails to deliver on the promise of the licence. It needed more polish.





Left: Even though the guns have been lovingly recreated, they don't really pack the punch you'd quite expect. They aren't as visceral as they appear in Cameron's flick.

excused for not following along. Hanging in between *Aliens* and *Alien 3*, *Colonial Marines* does at time play with expanding the lore in a meaningful way but skirts over it almost immediately. Even some returning actors voicing their digital compatriots can't save the train wreck of a narrative, and it certainly doesn't help to immerse you in the world when the lip-syncing doesn't even match up. Without Cameron's guiding hand, the story never amounts to anything more than a vehicle to drive players from one disappointing corridor to the next.

Above: While you do get to commandeer a powerloader, it isn't nearly as fun as you'd expect. It's a big hulking mechanical monstrosity that doesn't have nearly as much payoff as you'd expect.

Below: Facehuggers will latch onto your face and try to impregnate you, prompting you to mash a button to get free. Ripley and the gang could really have benefited from QTEs back in the '70s.

Ignoring the erratic production schedule of *Colonial Marines*, which began with an early 2006 announcement from developer Gearbox, the game handles itself very much like a title making that transition from one generation to the next. Certainly, many of *Colonial Marines*' flaws could have been excusable back in the early days of the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, but now, when every title is polished to a near excruciating level of quality, it just doesn't cut it.

Perhaps it's a question of expectation. Coming from the house that bore *Brothers In Arms* and *Borderlands*, you expect a certain level of quality from Gearbox Software, which *Colonial Marines* fails to deliver at its most fundamental level. As the game slowly drops into LV-426, we didn't find ourselves in awe of the overbearing planet, but instead found ourselves taken aback by the blandness with which Gearbox has interpreted the world.



At this stage in the cycle, we have certain expectations of high-budget games, which *Aliens: Colonial Marines* fails to hit on almost every level. Graphically, it's one of the worst we've seen grace consoles in years – it certainly may have been acceptable back in 2006 when the game was conceived, but now it just looks embarrassing up against other titles coming out in the Q1 release window.

So what went wrong? Gearbox with one of the most lucrative licences in the world should have been a winning combination, but it's a disaster. Mechanically, the game functions, but the fun of the *Alien* universe is quickly drained away by what amounts to a mundane shooting gallery through a drab and lifeless world. We've been looking forward to this one for close to seven years, though it seems our affection was misplaced after all.

VERDICT 4/10

FAILS TO CAPITALISE ON WHAT THE LICENCE PROMISES

ABANDON HOPE ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE

The Cave

Amid all the talk of originality drying up and this being a generation of safety plays and wallets leading hearts and minds, it's easy to forget just how many firsts we've seen in the last few years. This generation has given us the first real glimpse of what DLC can add to games, with brands like *Borderlands* and *Fallout* leading the charge; it's given us gaming's first profanely named hero in *Shadows Of The Damned*'s Garcia F***ing Hotspur; it's offered us our first glimpse of Satan's digitised penis, courtesy of *Dante's Inferno*; it's even served up the first known example of riding a horse being a suspicious activity – take a bow, *Assassin's Creed*, but be careful not to put your hands together or we won't be able to see you. And now, to top it all off, Double Fine has come out with yet another first – a sentient cave. And they say originality is dead.

Our point? Well, as facetiously disguised as it may be, it's that *The Cave* isn't a particularly original game - it's an extremely old-fashioned game dressed up as one. To all intents and purposes, it's a point-and-click adventure although given that several of the original settlers of *Monkey Island* are behind it, that's hardly surprising. But here, the old-school 'use X on Y' mechanics are spliced with evergreen puzzle-platformer gameplay to give the game that little extra kick, so it's a little strange that so many of *The Cave*'s other fundamentals seem to be intentionally designed to take that edge off.

The first decision you make upon entering *The Cave* is who to take with you. Seven stereotypes fight for your attention – each with their own unique ability – but you can choose just three, the rest waiting patiently at the entrance to be picked on a subsequent playthrough. Having chosen your trio, the HUD takes shape – your trio can be switched between on the fly using the D-pad and most puzzles will usually call for most (if not all) to get involved. This teamwork aspect calls to mind *Lost Vikings* or more recently *Trine*, though both had better ways of dealing with an interchangeable threesome than *The Cave* – small maps and transmogrification respectively. But *The Cave* is deep and tendrilous and its explorers supremely lazy. They seldom move without direct instruction to do so and given the amount of spelunking and backtracking that needs to be done, you'll quickly tire of guiding three separate characters across the same sections of the map.

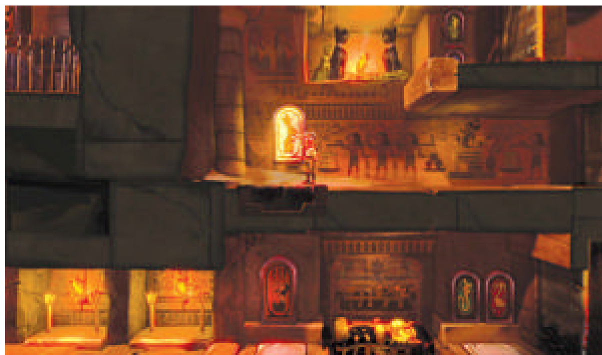
That is to say that it feels like a cheap way of artificially extending the duration of the game, most likely because it is. *The Cave*'s puzzles are for the most part incredibly straightforward, any difficulty stemming not from what to do but from where to find the Obvious Solution Item in that particular set of tunnels. Each area is a self-contained challenge, although an interesting twist does see the cavern's layout change slightly depending on the heroes you pick. Granted, it only changes to force you

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PlayStation 3, Wii U
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: Double Fine
PRICE: 1,200 MS Points
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-3
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Above: While it's easy to fall in love with the locales, each hides a puzzle that's likely to put your head in a spin. While we love blitzing through games as much as the next person, *The Cave* makes you take a more considered approach.





Above: *The Cave* looks gorgeous, which is no surprise coming out of Double Fine Studios. It's one of the best-looking digital titles we've seen.



Right: The characters that inhabit the world of *The Cave* give Ron Gilbert ample time to demonstrate his brand of comedy.

IT'S ONLY THE LACK OF A 'FOLLOW' BUTTON THAT PREVENTS THE GAME FROM BEING ABLE TO BE COMPLETED IN A MATTER OF MINUTES

Below: While we await Double Fine's *Adventure* game, *The Cave* gives us a nice idea of what to expect when the studio makes its full blown return to what it does best.





FAQs

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?

Your first run will take five hours or so; subsequent ones will be far quicker, especially once you work out a few of the sneaky tricks.

Q. MUCH REPLAY VALUE?

Sure – each of the seven characters has their unique unique puzzle area, plus there are multiple endings to discover.

Q. IS IT FUNNY?

Not to the degree it seems to think it is. It's frequently amusing but rarely laugh-out-loud hilarious.

UNDERACHIEVERS

Finished *The Cave* yet still only sat on a paltry pile of Gamerpoints? Not to worry – aside from the usual crop of 'well done, please keep playing' goals, most of the Achievements come from doing things a little differently. Like any good puzzler, *The Cave* isn't willing to lead you by the hand to find success. The cryptic clues offered by some of the achievement descriptions are almost a game in and of themselves, vaguely suggesting less immediate ways of doing things and leaving the rest to you. That said, not all of the Gs on offer point to solutions – some are just there to make sure you're exploring the expansive world properly/at all. Besides, half the fun of a Ron Gilbert game comes from hunting down its secrets and mysteries.





through your three characters' mandatory 'story' puzzles, though these are the clear highlights – we particularly enjoyed the Scientist's grim mini-adventure and the Time-Traveller's *Day Of The Tentacle*-inspired section, though different kinds of people are likely to derive their own highlights.

But for a game that is clearly designed to be played (at least) three times over, it's a little strange that it should be so padded with stock puzzles and repeated dialogue. By your second play, the non-character-specific elements will be a breeze (especially when you start using the Monk's telekinesis and the Knight's invulnerability to perform sequence breaks) and it's only the lack of a 'follow' button that prevents the game from being able to be completed in a matter of minutes.

Still, there's much to shoot for on your repeat visits to *The Cave*. Achievements are cleverly used to reward imaginative and experimental play, plus there are abstract solutions to some seemingly obvious puzzles that can result in different outcomes, and it's these that will have you scratching your head more than anything else. The talking cave is hardly hesitant in offering cryptic clues and eventually descends into thinly veiled quick and easy solutions, though you're pretty much on your own when it comes to doing things 'the right way'.

You'd have to stretch pretty far to take any marks away from *The Cave* from a presentation standpoint, though. A few minor visual niggles aside, it's artistically sublime and from individual character animations to environments, you'll never wish for anything more than a bigger TV. Music is used sparingly but to great effect, while even voice work doesn't let the side down – the script sits a little uncomfortably between the point-and-click old guard and the incendiary rising stars of the indie scene but all the same, the actors deliver what they're handed brilliantly.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

FOLLOW ME!: *Abe* got it right – outside of artificially extending the duration of a three-hour game, we've no idea why the ability to have other player characters follow your lead wouldn't be implemented.

It's hard to work out what exactly *The Cave is*. If it's meant to be a point-and-click adventure then there are already way better examples in the back catalogues of the guys responsible. If it's supposed to fuse those ideals with more traditional videogame concepts then you need look no further than *Zack & Wiki* – a game which, sadly, has more names in its title than appear on the list of people who actually bought it – to find a better example. And if it's trying to do anything on a moral level then we just hope it picked up an umbrella, because *The Walking Dead* is in the process of pissing all over it.

At once entertaining, frustrating, beautiful and fleeting, *The Cave* is way better in concept than execution. And as much as it has going for it, some poor design decisions mean that frustration and boredom will quickly get rid of players that would otherwise have lapped this up.

VERDICT 6/10

FRUSTRATING FLAWS UNDERMINE A GREAT GAME

WHY A FOUR-YEAR-OLD RPG MIGHT BE VITA'S BEST GAME

Persona 4 Golden

There's nothing new about the concept of a protagonist coming to terms with their inner self, being thrust awkwardly into an unfamiliar environment or overcoming the handicap of absentee parents: such tropes are particularly well-worn in Japanese role-playing games. What's extraordinary about Persona 4 Golden is that it makes these ideas feel new, this smart, contemporary mystery nimbly avoiding the common pitfalls of the genre. You may rarely leave the ostensibly sleepy town of Inaba, yet by the end you'll feel you've been taken on an unforgettable journey.

Naturally, Inaba isn't as quiet as it first seems. As you arrive, this small hamlet is shocked by a murder that coincides with some suspiciously inclement weather, and a shroud of fog that lifts only to reveal the corpse in question. Your detective uncle is busy with the case, leaving you even more isolated than you'd expected to be. And just as a pair of friendly classmates help ease your transition, another murder occurs, seemingly linked to an urban myth involving watching a particular TV channel at midnight.

Indeed, the TV plays a key role as the story of these apparent serial murders unfolds, its screens acting as a portal to a netherworld that you and new friends Chie and Yosuke can investigate. As students start to go missing, your small group plays detective as you figure out you may be able to stop the murders. So you're fighting demons within these labyrinths while negotiating the pitfalls of school life, not just in terms of keeping up your studies at a crucial time of your educational life, but maintaining the social ties that become so important during adolescence.

A languid, linear opening soon gives way to a compelling rhythm of school days and extracurricular activities, as real-life choices affect your abilities in the supernatural world. You can spend time in part-time jobs to earn money or increase particular skills, or hang around with other characters to forge social links, from practising high-kicks with the tomboyish to joining sports or music clubs, or even spending time with your uncle on the rare nights that he makes it home from work. Most nights you'll get the opportunity to play big brother to his daughter, a wise-beyond-her-years youngster who tragically uses the TV as her escape from her lonely existence.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: NIS America
DEVELOPER: Atlus
PRICE: £29.99
RELEASE: 22 Feb
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



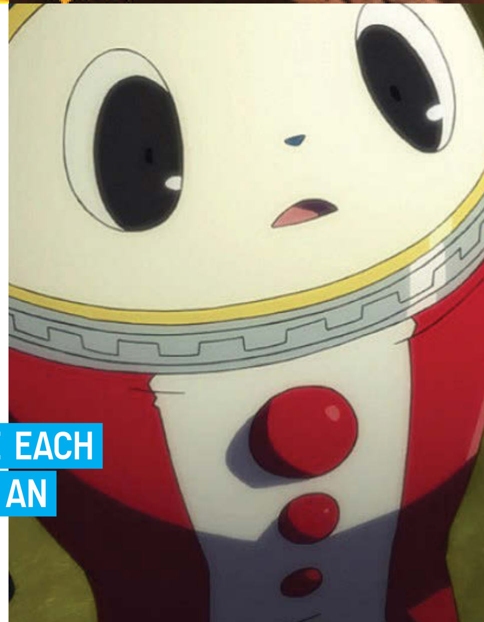
Below: *Persona 4* feels perfectly at home on Vita, not least because it's easier to squeeze into your day-to-day life. In a game where you spend most of your time trying to fit in various activities around your education and investigative work, it's oddly apt.





Yet if the TV is an escape for poor Nanako, it's a prison for others. You're given a time limit to rescue each missing student, lending the game an urgency rare to JRPGs. Their dungeons are manifestations of a dormant part of their psyche: there's a steamy bathhouse for a biker student confused about his sexuality, for example, while a shy girl has constructed an elaborate fairy-tale realm where she awaits her Prince. Rescuing each character isn't so much about forcing them to confront their inner demons, more to accept this side of their personality they might rather others didn't know about.

Right: The graphics look sharper than many Vita games. Though its PS2 origins are clear, the crisp 2D art and the attention to detail in the world of Inaba – a few textures have been tweaked, too, it seems – make this an attractive game.



YOU'RE GIVEN A TIME LIMIT TO RESCUE EACH MISSING STUDENT, LENDING THE GAME AN URGENCY RARE TO JRPGS



Left: Ignore the bad weather and frequent murders, and *Persona 4* makes small-town life seem rather appealing, particularly the generous servings at Aiya restaurant.

Below: While the combat system is a standard turn-based affair, battles require more thought than simply selecting your strongest attack. It often pays to hit enemies with a status effect before your team-mates wade in.





FAQs

Q. HOW LONG?
Depends on the difficulty level, but at least 50 hours.

Q. ANY NEW CHARACTERS?
New Velvet Room inhabitant Marie offers a new social link.

Q. HOW ABOUT EASTER EGGS?
Check the TV listings at midnight for a surprise.

TEENAGE DIRTBAGS?

Though the script may occasionally be heavy-handed, and the performances earnestly overacted, the interactions between the game's characters have a solid grounding in reality. Where many of its peers rely on laboured exposition, *Persona 4 Golden* takes time making Inaba's inhabitants feel like real people with real problems. It's the juxtaposition of the fantastical with the mundane that makes it so fascinating: conversations with your classmates might involve nothing more exciting than beef stew or kung-fu films, but through these exchanges, a strong affection for these characters begins to grow. Crucially, no one is presented as a saint: even the friendliest classmates have minor outbursts. It's the flaws that make these people feel like genuine characters rather than mere ciphers.





Uncomfortable truths emerge in a manner that says a great deal about adolescence, Atlus boldly confronting thorny subject matter and handling it with an uncommonly delicate touch and no little humour.

As just about every action has a tangible consequence of some kind, even the more mundane elements of school life are meaningful. You might be asked to answer some surprisingly tricky questions during lectures, for example, and while answering correctly isn't vital, doing so can increase your knowledge rating and thereby open up certain dialogue options. With after-school clubs and part-time jobs to consider, the options are overwhelming: what happens when band practice clashes with a soccer match or you're just settling down to study when a classmate phones, asking to hang out? The ties you choose to strengthen determine the abilities of the personae you create to fight on your behalf in the TV realm – the stronger the link, the more skills you can pass on when fusing personae to create more powerful creatures.

Brisk, dynamic and tactically satisfying, *P4G*'s battle system is still arguably its least interesting element. It's a relatively straightforward turn-based affair with a few twists: hit an enemy's elemental weakness and you get another shot, another character might join in with a bonus attack after a critical hit, while downing all opponents at once gives you the chance to pile in under a cartoon dust cloud. The protagonist is the only character under your control, though your team-mates demonstrate remarkable intelligence in combat, and you can set their tactical approach before each battle. They can also be quite easily revived; it's only game over if you fall.

That should happen a little less often than before. There are new connectivity options that allow you to see the choices other players made at that time – useful if you need a suggestion for where to head after school's out – and you can issue an SOS in a dungeon, with a boost to your HP and SP numbers if someone answers your call. There's a new character with a melancholic backstory, while a few of the original's narrative gaps are filled in.

Is it enough, though, for *Persona* veterans to double-dip? Broadly speaking, this is the same game we've played before on PS2, but the addition of fresh personae and social links, and the sheer range of activities available at any one time did much to dissipate our expected fatigue. It all adds up to the definitive version of one of the finest JRPGs ever made: Vita's portability makes it easier than ever to get caught up in this expertly woven web of secrets, lies and adolescent angst.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

PICTURE PERFECT: Crisp overlays and character art make this the best-looking *Persona* to date. It even allows you to choose from a range of outfits to wear in the dungeons.

VERDICT 9/10
STILL TOP OF THE JRPG CLASS

WHAT WILL YOU DO WITH THE WHOLE WORLD IN YOUR HANDS?

Scribblenauts Unlimited

Right: Puzzles can range from helping a group of travellers find Medusa a boyfriend so she'll stop turning them to stone out of boredom, to helping a kleptomaniac penguin steal precious diamonds from a museum. It's all pretty silly, but fun all the same.

***Scribblenauts* makes big promises from the moment the title screen flashes across the screen.** The word 'Unlimited' arresting your attention, it has massive connotations, especially when building upon what's already gone before. *Scribblenauts* is a puzzle game that encourages players to use a magical notebook to create anything imaginable. Whereas 2010's *Super Scribblenauts* let you assign adjectives to objects, increasing the variety of play and puzzle-solving methods, *Unlimited* promises to let you add your own words and associations to the already bursting lexicon available. Sadly, for a game that promises untapped potential, it too often leans on thinking within the box.

We once again assume the role of Maxwell, and his adventure begins with a lesson in humility. After having played a trick on a hungry old man, Maxwell's sister is cursed, becoming petrified with each passing day. The only way you can save her, ironically enough, is by completing good deeds.

This is the first *Scribblenauts* adventure to come to consoles, and when presented on Wii U and PC, the areas look great in beautiful HD. Unlike preview iterations which offered set puzzle scenarios that you had to overcome with the full force of your creative thinking, *Unlimited* instead offers a *Super Mario World*-style hub with Maxwell progressing through themed zones such as a desert, a haunted house and a pirate ship to earn enough goodwill to free his sister.

The zones themselves are finely detailed, and the puzzles dotted across expansive levels. It's perhaps this expansion where *Scribblenauts* begins to falter. Whereas in previous versions you could explore multiple (and often hilarious) solutions to the puzzle at hand, *Unlimited* only asks for a simpler, single solution before you move on to help the next citizen. This of course creates a faster flow to play, with mini-stories playing out across multiple characters, creating a cascading series of events. While this brings about more frequent occasions where a smile may be planted firmly across your face, it does remove much of the creative thinking that has come to define the series.

Once the realisation hits that the game not only requires the bare minimum to progress, but subconsciously encourages it, it begins to take much of the fun away. Played in bursts of longer than 30 minutes at a time, you begin to see the cracks forming underneath an otherwise source of carefree fun. One underwater cavern is full of toxic waste that you must eagerly remove. Summoning a black hole to send it to the netherworld doesn't register, nor does editing the object to become 'untoxic waste'. In the end, blasting it with a shotgun so the drum-container explodes all over the sea floor was the 'correct' solution. To be fair, most puzzles can be solved with a shotgun blast, not out of laziness, but because more creative solutions often falter. *Unlimited* is rarely challenging, with its failure to

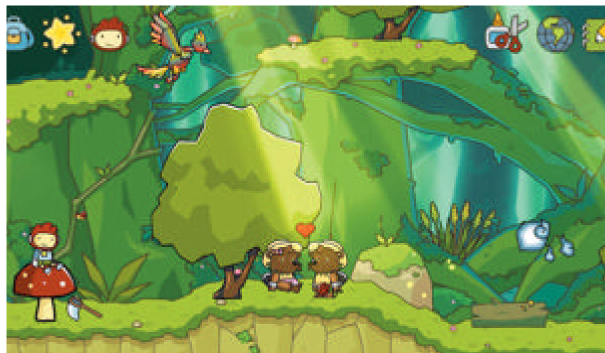
DETAILS

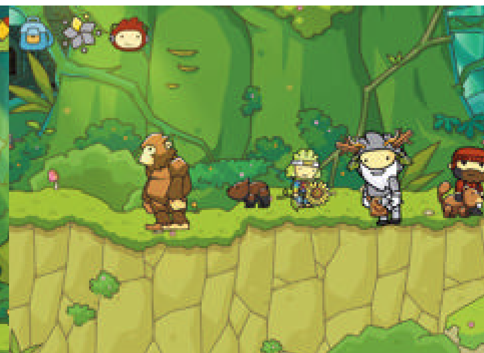
FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Warner Bros
DEVELOPER: 5th Cell
PRICE: £45.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



Above: *Scribblenauts* certainly looks beautiful on its console debut; the HD graphics are really fantastic. It's just a shame you don't have much reason to ever look at the television screen.

Below: With the object editor, some really crazy creations can be fully realised – the only limit is your imagination.



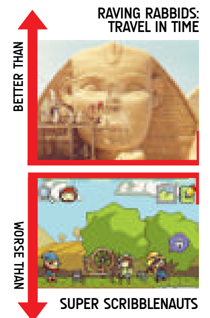




Right: Puzzles now span expansive levels, with almost every NPC in sight needing assistance in some way. While you're supposed to be doing good deeds to free your sister, as long as the association is correct you can really mess with people.

MOST PUZZLES CAN BE SOLVED WITH A SHOTGUN BLAST, NOT OUT OF LAZINESS, BUT BECAUSE MORE CREATIVE SOLUTIONS OFTEN FALTER





FAQs

Q. GOOD FOR KIDS?
Likely to delight children who are just getting the hang of word association, it's a colourful way to expand their vocabulary.

Q. 3DS OBJECT EDITOR?
No, due to hardware limitations – instead it gets StreetPass and SpotPass support.

Q. A FUN STORY?
It starts and ends with you trying to save your sister, and after an beautifully hand drawn cut-scene, the rest plays out in-game.

SCRIBBLENAUTS REVEALS SOME NINTENDO TRUTHS

5th Cell has worked out a deal with Nintendo to have some of the latter's most famous creations appear throughout *Scribblenauts Unlimited* on 3DS and Wii U. Great news considering the game otherwise restricts you from creating licensed characters or objects. Mario and his entourage can be summoned, and even interact with one another – a good thing considering they rarely interact with the wider world (except Bowser, who rampages everything in sight). *Unlimited* does, however, answer a question that has been prevalent in our minds for many years: Link versus Cthulhu, who would win in a battle for the end of the Earth? It turns out Link would strike the Lovecraftian horror down in a heartbeat, but only if he has the Master Sword.



recognise wild solutions siphoning off interest quickly. Still, for children and watching parents, who can interact with created items and avatars with Wii Remotes, *Scribblenauts Unlimited* is a wholly innocent shot at increasing vocabulary and word association.

The Wii U GamePad is a natural fit, acting as the magical notepad while action plays out on the larger screen above. It works perfectly in execution, albeit a little too well. In actuality, there's no need to look up at the television. The GamePad ends up acting as the hub to enter words, the notepad and you can also use the small screen to watch the results of your tomfoolery, creating a situation where you rarely have any need to move your head between both screens. The developer even included an option to *just* play it on the GamePad, letting you power your TV off (or switch it to another channel), with *Scribblenauts* then playing like a wonderfully drawn and animated single-screen DS game.

When the world of *Scribblenauts* falls in line with your creative drive, it's a delight to play. Seeing the world react to your understanding of a word and situation is immensely gratifying, but when an obvious solution fails due to the game's abstract limitations, the allure of such a free-thinking product quickly becomes stale. Perhaps it's because *Unlimited* isn't a puzzle game, not in the traditional sense anyway. For the most part it boils down to simple word association, asking players to make use of their vocabulary instead of the depths of their imagination. For all its wide-eyed charm and ingenuity, there really isn't much to *Scribblenauts Unlimited*. After four entries into the series, the novelty is starting to wear off – and no amount of cheeky one-liners and alarmingly cute visuals can escape the fact that *Unlimited* becomes mind-numbingly boring, pretty damn quickly.

The biggest disappointment comes, through no fault of its own, in the form of the object editor. Players can now create their own avatars and items. Piecing together new creations from the gigantic lexicon available, you can even edit properties such as resilience to fire, abilities and reactions to events. While it's fantastic in theory, your complex creations never translate properly into the world – let alone assist you in solving the easy array of puzzles. It's not that we don't want flying Cthulhu adorned with ice-powers to teach children about fire safety, it's just that the game probably won't accept it as a viable solution.

The ability to craft and manipulate whatever you can imagine is magical. Sadly, this debut console outing fails to combine that magic with engaging gameplay and it never manages to surpass your own expectations.

CONNECTED
EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

OBJECT EDITOR: Being able to make your own creations is great and all that, but a puzzle and scenario creator is almost a necessity for this sort of experience. Maybe next time.

VERDICT 6/10
FAILS TO LIVE UP TO THE PROMISES ITS NAME MAKES





Left: Sly's adventure takes him all over the globe as well as through time itself.

Right: Bentley and Murray also come along for the ride, each offering unique talents.





EVERYONE'S FAVOURITE FILCHING RACCOON IS BACK TO INFILTRATE YOUR PS VITA

Sly Cooper: Thieves In Time

It's been a decade since the legendary burglar Sly Cooper snuck onto PlayStation 2 consoles worldwide, but this fourth outing comes a staggering seven years after the previous instalment, *Sly 3: Honor Among Thieves*. In that time the series has acquired a new developer, with Sucker Punch moving aside for Sanzaru Games, the talented team which put together 2010's HD *Sly Collection* on the PS3.

In this new venture, Sly and his ragtag band of thieves are facing their most significant test yet; pages from the legendary Thievius Raccoonus are being erased from history, but thanks to Bentley the Turtle's time machine, the freshly reformed team can travel through the ages to restore the Cooper family legacy.

In the quest that follows, the player assumes control of Sly, Bentley, Murray and Carmelita Fox – the female cop from previous episodes who has since become Sly's girlfriend. Along the way you'll also gain control of Cooper's ancestors, whom he meets as he time-warps between the various eras of history. In a neat twist, meeting with these esteemed relatives imbues the player with unique powers and there are areas in each period which are inaccessible unless you have a suit gained from a different point in time. This element sits alongside the usual mixture of skills showcased by Sly's team, with each member having their own attacks and abilities.

Because *Thieves In Time* is a cross-platform affair and also exists on the PS3, the developer has kept the controls as uniform as possible between the two formats. Given how many other Vita-exclusive titles come with superfluous touch-based elements attached, this is actually something of a blessing – although controlling the in-game camera can often be a headache due to the lack of an 'R3' button on the right-hand analogue stick to snap the view behind the lead character. This means you often have to manually rotate the camera to get the best view, which can be a bit of a pain when you're in an enclosed environment.

Despite this minor niggle, it's clear that Sanzaru Games has done a commendable job of leading the *Sly Cooper* series into fresh technological pastures. The cross-play functionality means that those lucky enough to own both a PS3 and PS Vita can share their progress between the two systems, and although the handheld edition takes a predictable drop in graphical quality and frame rate, it still looks impressively bold on that AMOLED screen.

Sly Cooper's seven-year absence may have resulted in many Sony supporters forgetting he even exists, but *Thieves In Time* is the ideal vehicle to reassert his talents. It's also a great way for the PS Vita to begin 2013 – a year which will hopefully see a change in fortunes for the ailing handheld.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
OTHER FORMATS: PS3
ORIGIN: North America
PUBLISHER: Sony Computer Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Sanzaru Games
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: 27 March
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN: SLY COOPER AND THE THIEVIUS RACCOONUS



WORSE THAN: SLY 2: BAND OF THIEVES

FINGERPRINT

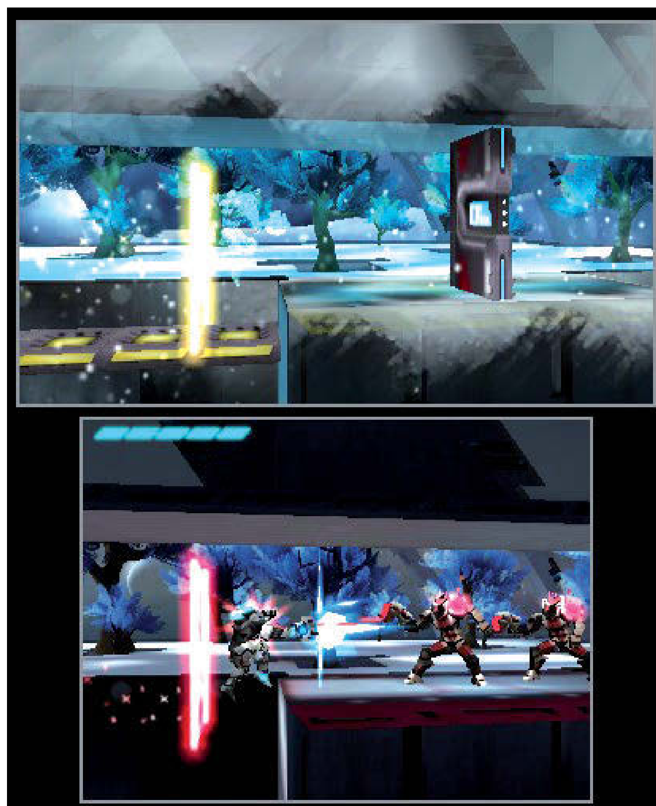
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

THE GENERATION GAME: As the team travels through time, Sly is able to harness the skills of his ancestors to unlock new powers and abilities – a cool bow and arrow being one example.

VERDICT 8/10

SLY'S RETURN GIVES THE VITA RENEWED HOPE





Left: The amount of time spent dying is huge. You actually have to complete rewire the way you think and compute space and progression in order to have any success at all.

TWO SCREENS. TWO LIVES. TOO HARD

Fractured Soul

The Nintendo DS has probably been the most consistent source of gameplay innovation since the original model's release in 2004. The combination of touch screen and dual display has let the creative side of the industry experiment and craft styles and concepts of videogame that simply didn't exist before. And just when you thought all the ideas had dried up, along comes Endgame's *Fractured Soul*, a twin-screened 3DS platformer that just begs to be admired by the chin-stroking cognoscenti.

Its core idea is actually pretty simple. You're a robot dude thing, and each side-scrolling platform level exists in a duality. The layout is the same on both screens, but each display will feature its own obstacles, so enemies or specific platforms only exist on one or the other screen. Your robot dude can switch between a physical and ethereal form, effectively 'jumping' between each screen and navigating the 30+ levels as well as his robot boots will let him.

It's such a simple idea that it seems crazy no one's thought of it before. Crazy, that is, until you actually play *Fractured Soul*, and realise that not every great innovation is worth hanging onto. Developer Endgame ramps the difficulty up to nuclear levels within mere minutes, demanding double-screen-switches across jumps and over pitfalls as early as the third mission.

That, and the awkward checkpointing, means that almost all of your time spent in *Fractured Soul* is spent dying, accompanied by a hilarious recording of a man's voice screaming as he falls to his death. Why a robot sounds like a 40-year-old from the West Country is anyone's guess, but we're glad he does.

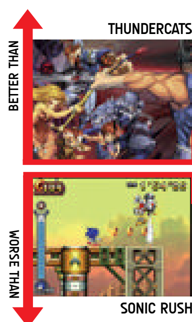
It's doubly frustrating, because this is clearly a very well-designed game. The jumping is solid, the basic combat reminiscent of classic Amiga side-scrollers, and the whole thing has a really pleasing 1992 vibe to it that'll charm the older folk among us. The level design is consistently clever and appreciable – it's clear that Endgame really knows what it's doing.

In chasing that hardcore platforming dream, though, it has lost sight of what makes even the hardest games in that genre so intoxicating. Even the punishing misery of *Contra* and *Metal Slug* let you spend more time alive than dead. To do so in *Fractured Soul* would require a tremendous amount of patience and dedication, because the sheer task of playing a game on two screens at the same time is just too much for the brain to take. It's a rewiring job, and the game just isn't worth the effort.

Undoubtedly, though, some patient souls will share in Endgame's vision and get something more out of *Fractured Soul*, but unlike some of the more esoteric hardcore games out there, the destination probably isn't worth the journey.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Australia
PUBLISHER: UTV
DEVELOPER: Endgame
PRICE: £7.19
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

CHECK IT OUT: Far be it from us to clamour for a lower difficulty level, but tighter checkpointing would turn *Fractured Soul* into a *Trials*-style grind rather than the war it is now.

VERDICT 6/10

GREAT IDEA, BUT TOO FRUSTRATING TO FULFIL IT

LEVEL-5 IS ON A ROLL

Crimson Shroud





Above: *Crimson Shroud* isn't much of a looker, but the 3D effect works remarkably well – you almost want to reach out and touch the apparently hand-painted miniatures at times.

Even though most of the civilised world apparently likes nothing more than to assume the role of Shooty McGunman (or SMG for short) and kill their friends in the head in the odd Team Deathmatch, traditional role-playing still has a bizarre stigma attached to it. How come it's cool to pretend to be a gun-toting rookie with the weight of the world on his shoulders, but it's nowhere near as cool to be a paladin with an equally heavy cross to bear?

It's an experience people want, but ideally one closer to a news broadcast than that depicted on an unpronounceable tapestry somewhere in the world. And so few will ever experience the colourful vocabulary and quick thinking of a great Dungeon Master that it's easier just to let our games paint a felt-tip picture of whatever it is we're supposed to be doing and have done with it. But if it's adventure you seek, we can safely say that there are few better digital crash courses available than *Crimson Shroud*.

Effectively, upon downloading *Crimson Shroud*, your 3DS becomes the DM and you become a lone player in control of an entire party. Simple, board-game-style visuals are backed up with verbose descriptions of each and every location you visit, the digital DM keen to make sure you know every little detail about your surroundings. And to be fair, it paints a great picture: both dialogue and narration are pretty well written and draw you into the world brilliantly – unless you're blessed with a friend who was raised on a diet of *D&D* and can DM like a boss, chances are this is as close as you'll have come to the epicentre of geekdom.

And it's wonderful. With so many 'traditional' RPG franchises fleeing the dice-driven engine, it's refreshing to see something like this follow the Dungeon Master's Guide to the letter. Well, not to the letter perhaps, but close enough. You see, dice aren't just used to determine effect values and attack likelihoods here – they're also a reward for a slightly forced combo system. Use different elemental powers in sequence and you'll rack up increasingly large bonus dice that can be added to any attack or probability. That enemy attacks also count in this mechanic makes it a little hard to plan and/or exploit effectively, but it's certainly useful all the same.

Despite lacking the total freedom of choice offered by tabletop RPGs, *Crimson Shroud* is one of the best digital approximations we've come across. It stands as a refreshing and unique experience, not just in the 3DS's catalogue but the wider gaming world, and serves as a poignant reminder of just how closely related videogames and their physical forerunners really are. So thanks, Level-5, for reminding us that it's not just you we love – it's the whole damn family.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Level-5
PRICE: £7.19
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN — UNLIMITED SAGA



AS GOOD AS — STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

GOING THROUGH CHANGES: While *Crimson Shroud* is a great solo experience, it could do with some degree of random generation to make it more than a one-run thing.

VERDICT 8/10
2D3+4/10

Below: In an initially confusing mechanic, smaller dice can be added to low success percentages rather than damage values to hugely improve the odds of an otherwise unlikely attack.





PROBABLY SHOULD HAVE STAYED BURIED

Knytt Underground

Below: If you're looking for likeable characters, you've come to the wrong place. The rude, the idiotic and the hateful run rampant in the land of *Knytt.*



For every indie success story like *Braid* or *Fez* that manages to punch through to the gaming mainstream, there are countless other spirited low-key releases that don't manage to make their mark. It's not always a matter of quality – some of the most interesting and original games you're ever likely to play are only a search engine and a couple of mouse clicks away, after all. Still, many indie titles build a following over time, as evidenced by *Minecraft*'s sprawling voxel universe, but even so, migrating to consoles is a journey that precious few PC indie darlings dare to brave, let alone survive. And while Swedish one-man-band Nifflas might have made ripples on the PC scene with his delightful lo-fi adventures, his console debut makes a splash about as impressive as Magikarp's.

Style counts for a lot on the indie circuit and if an underdog can't have its coat decorated with rosettes bearing words like 'charming' or 'striking', chances are it's barking up the wrong tree with its looks. The pixel-art stylings of the original *Knytt* games have been lost in translation here and while it's a change for the better in the case of the beautiful environments, the world's residents don't fare nearly as well. It's a cast of Flash game extras and randomly generated social media dress-up dolls (with all the character of either), ugly characters at odds with the lush settings, while narrative isn't so much an afterthought as a neverthought.

All of which would be forgivable if the platforming was up to snuff. Which, as you can probably guess from the conditional approach to this paragraph, it isn't. Mute lead Mi slides around like a speed-skating Sackboy, overly sensitive controls the cause of many a bungled leap as frustration spirals to hazardous levels. To make matters worse, just as you're starting to get a feel for the slippery nonsense, Mi is inexplicably switched out for a living ball as *Knytt* becomes a shoddy physics-based platformer for its second act – the mechanic sort of falls into place in the final chapter when the interesting ability to switch forms on the fly is introduced (and frequently demanded), but it still lacks the reliability and consistency so crucial to the success of platforming's greats.

The huge Metroidvania world presents hours of exploration for those willing to humour *Knytt*'s frankly inadequate mechanics, the daunting map screen a constant reminder that you're not even close to filling in all the blanks. It's just a shame that the impressive scale presents a chore rather than an adventure and the token indie quirkiness only serves to grate when the fundamentals frequently don't function as they should.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PlayStation 3
OTHER FORMATS: PS Vita
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Nifflas' Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN — MOON DIVER



WORSE THAN — SPELUNKY

MISSING LINK

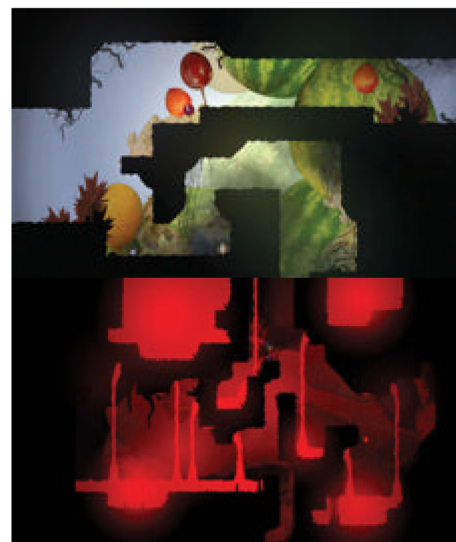
WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

BALLS TO THAT: Chapter 2 switches things up to put you in control of a bouncy ball – control here is frustratingly twitchy and areas designed to accommodate the ball are all the worse for it.

VERDICT 5/10
STICK TO THE PC ORIGINALS



Above: Quests can be picked up from a few of the NPCs, though few diverge from the fetch quest format and fewer still actually feel in any way rewarding.

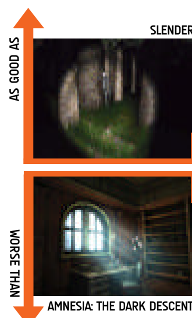


"THERE'S SOMETHING OUT THERE AND IT AIN'T NO MAN. WE'RE ALL GOING TO DIE"

Miasmata

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: IonFX Studios
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £9.35 (gog.com) £11.99 (steam.com)
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: OS: Windows XP, Intel Core2 Duo/AMD Athlonn64x2 processor, 2GB RAM, NVidia GeForce 8600GT/ATI Radeon 3670HD or equivalent graphics card, DirectX 9.0, 3GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



AS GOOD AS: SLENDER

WORSE THAN: AMNESIA: THE DARK DESCENT

On paper, *Miasmata* sounds like a tantalising mash-up, with the developer combining the open-world exploration of *Far Cry 3* with the crap-your-pants scares of *Amnesia*. The reality is somewhat weaker, but developer IonFX (which comprises a simple two-brother team) has nonetheless created an immersive adventure game that's as brutal as it is innovative.

Miasmata casts you in the unfortunate shoes of scientist Robert Hughes. Waking up on a seemingly deserted island and stricken with a deadly plague, you must attempt to find a cure for your malady and discover what happened to the other dead scientists that crop up on your travels.

A nearby hut reveals the recipe for your cure, but the flora needed for it is nowhere to be found, meaning you must explore the huge island before your debilitating sickness consumes you. And explore you must, for while *Miasmata* initially provides you with a handful of maps, you'll need to use proper cartography to make your way across the lost world. This is achieved by opening your map and looking at two known locations, which can consist of huts or the large Easter Island-like heads dotted throughout the island. Once two waypoints have been selected, you can triangulate your position and slowly unlock more and more of the map. It's an arduous process, to be sure, but it delivers a level of immersion that simple auto-mapping can never achieve.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

COMPASS NEEDED: *Miasmata*'s mapmaking is genuinely different to similar adventures, and while it certainly makes the game a lot harder, it adds massively to its overall atmosphere.

The immersion is further deepened by your rapidly depleting energy, which requires you to constantly find water sources – dehydration plays a big factor in your sickness – and gather mushrooms, flowers and other flora to make potions that will stave off your sickness. And then of course there's the deadly predator that continually stalks you as you unlock the secrets of the mysterious island.

While the creature looks laughably pathetic and boasts an AI that's equally poor, its invulnerability and viciousness mean that it presents a genuine danger whenever it shows up, instilling a sense of fright that works exceptionally well. *Miasmata* is all about the atmosphere and it manages it beautifully. You really do feel alone and alienated, and the need to constantly map – good luck blindly stumbling off into the jungle – and forage to ensure your survival are genuinely satisfying components.

It's something of a pity then that *Miasmata*'s game engine isn't quite up to the same high standards, taking the sheen off this otherwise inventive game. Of course, it's commendable that it's the work of one man (Joe in this case), but the sub-optimal performance of the engine and occasional graphical glitches and inability to pick up certain objects pull you out of the world the brothers have so painstakingly created.

Miasmata is not perfect, but its inventiveness and compelling atmosphere just about outweigh its shortcomings, creating an adventure that becomes as enthralling as it is imperfect.

VERDICT 7/10

IT'S IMPERFECT, BUT STILL DELIVERS A SATISFYING JOURNEY

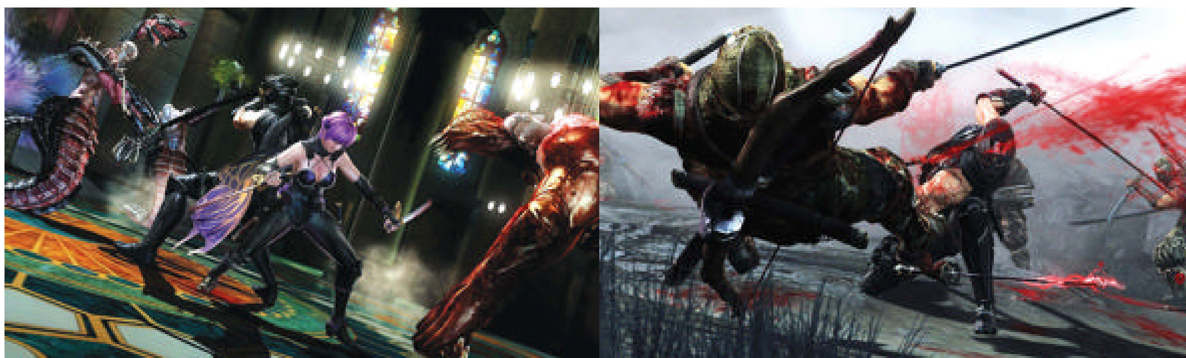


Above: It looks silly, but this mysterious beast nevertheless causes huge problems for you. Fire and throwing things will keep it back for a while, but your best bet is to run or hide, as two hits will normally end you.





Above: If you don't drink enough water you'll become ever more feverish. It affects your vision and balance – if you fall, you'll drop anything you're carrying at the time. Look for pools and jug refills whenever possible.



Left: If you're not playing on the GamePad's screen, the second display is used to show lists of combos, as well as touch points to press for Ninpo magic and weapon-switching, though it's just as quick to use the button commands.

A BLOODY MESS OF A SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT KIND

Ninja Gaiden 3: Razor's Edge

If we awarded marks for effort, the score at the bottom of this page would be a good deal healthier. Credit where it's due: Yosuke Hayashi and crew have made a meaningful attempt to right the wrongs of *Ninja Gaiden 3*. Some of the jarring tonal shifts of the original – mostly surrounding the inner turmoil of protagonist Ryu Hayabusa – have been excised, and so the game's more fantastical elements no longer clash so horribly with the more serious-minded moments of narrative. The number of Quick-Time Events has also been reduced, while limb-lopping and decapitation is back in vogue, deepening the impact of the combat. The liberal splashes of blood are finally justified.

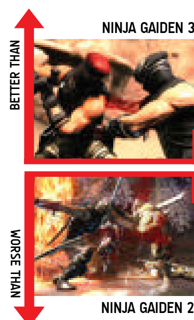
It's noticeably tougher, too, albeit not always in the right way. While *Ninja Gaiden 3* opted for a more accessible, welcoming approach, *Razor's Edge* is aptly sharper and deadlier. Enemies hit harder and arrive in plentiful number, though at times it's a little overwhelming. The leap in challenge from the lowest setting to the standard difficulty is enormous: the first sub-boss represents a ludicrous difficulty spike that will encourage many to drop to the easier level, though doing so makes the rest of the game embarrassingly easy. It's a fundamental misunderstanding of the series template: *Ninja Gaiden* has always been a harsh taskmaster, but the occasional example of Itagaki-sponsored mischief aside, it was consistently fair. Copious blood effects and a familiarly wayward camera can make encounters tricky to read, particularly on the GamePad's display. Masochists will relish the change, but being peppered by RPGs as you're trying to fend off a dozen regular opponents on the ground is an exercise in frustration.

There are moments, however, of genuine satisfaction. An infected Hayabusa is occasionally consumed by bloodlust, from which he naturally breaks free by murdering as many people as possible. Here, there's an increased focus on the cathartically gory steel-on-bone counter moves, prizing a patient, measured approach. It's rewarding to emerge from these sequences without a scratch, but often these highlights are closely followed by something bad. While the QTEs have been reduced in number, given Hayabusa's free-flowing skill and otherworldly speed it seems silly to have them at all. And someone should perhaps have a quiet word with whoever decided players should have to press alternate triggers to ascend walls, not least because Hayabusa may fall to his death for no reason during the climb.

There's further fresh content in the form of two Tecmo favourites as playable characters and additional missions, but at its heart *Razor's Edge* still feels like a compromise. Any praise Team Ninja deserves for listening to fan complaints and attempting to act upon them should be tempered with criticism of the mess that left this update fighting an uphill battle from the start.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Tecmo
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1 (2-8 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: No



ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

DEADLY AMMUNITION: *NG3* restricted Ryu to a single sword (extra weapons were added as DLC). Here you've got a much wider selection of offensive options, which alleviates some of the repetition.

VERDICT 6/10
A MARKED IMPROVEMENT

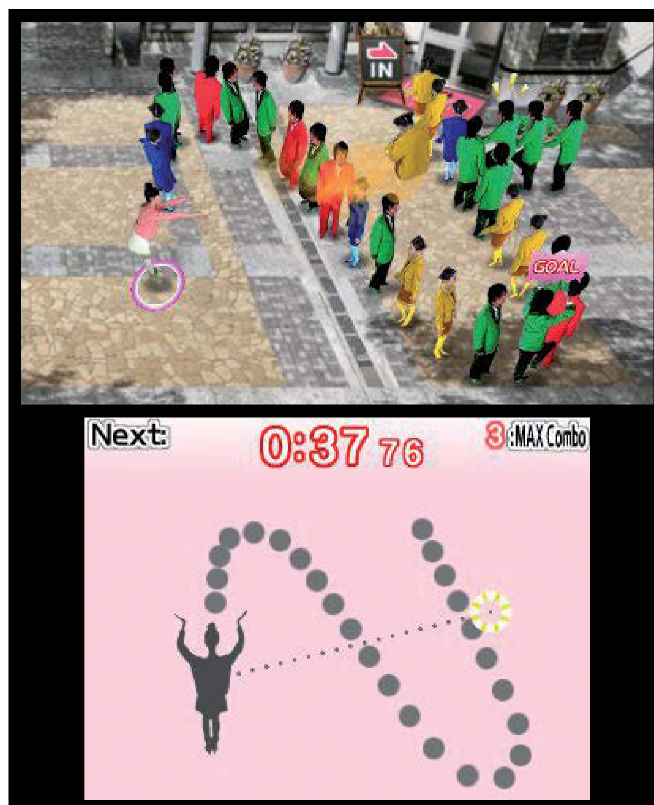


Above: *DOA*'s Ayane has a different moveset, but her missions hardly alter the game's pacing: fight dozens of foes in an enclosed space, then leap to the next area and repeat.





Below: The 3D effect on FMV is actually very cool, and there's not much camera tracking or panning so it shouldn't cause headaches. Try sticking the 3D up to full, turning the game on and passing it to an elderly relative. The confusion would be absolute.



THE STRANGEST GAME OF 2013? QUITE POSSIBLY

Tokyo Crash Mobs

If you were to show *Tokyo Crash Mobs* to someone who hasn't grown up with the eccentricities of Japanese gaming, they'd likely be so baffled they might actually question their opinion of you as a person. To the rest of us, this is still an utterly bizarre proposition, but we've been dealing with bizarreness for our whole lives. It's as normal to us as *Call Of Duty*.

Not that you could get two more diametrically opposed videogames. *Tokyo Crash Mobs* is an FMV-powered match-three effort, where two girls have to battle their way to the front of queues by hurling 'scenesters' at other identically coloured 'scenesters' in order to make them all disappear. It's the equivalent of turning up at an Alt-J concert and getting to the front of the queue by murdering anyone wearing braces. Only much funnier and way less violent.

The daunting madness of *Tokyo Crash Mobs* actually masks what is a fairly simple game, one that's based on Mitchell's own *Puzz Loop* series. While the action is split between queue-jumping and procession-halting, the basic gameplay remains the same. You're given a randomly coloured scenester, and by using the stylus to confirm your trajectory and distance, you simply throw them into the crowd. Match three or more of the same colour and they disappear, forcing the rest of the line to squeeze together. If that then pushes another three together, they will disappear and so on.

For all its melodrama, *Tokyo Crash Mobs* is actually a little stale and unoriginal. Once you're in the flow of the action, most of the madness slips to the sides as you concentrate on the game in question, and while it's mechanically sound, it's very basic. Later 'levels' in the story mode spice things up by introducing queue-jumping crowds that have to be quelled with a well-aimed hipster, or a bouncing bomb that can eliminate a host of suit-jockeys if struck precisely.

Even then, it's nothing that'll keep you glued to the 3DS for any great length of time. A challenge mode offers up extended games that demand high accuracy for high scores, but there's no shaking the fact that *Tokyo Crash Mobs* is still an inferior match-three game to *Puzzle Bobble*, and there are tons of innovative and interesting takes on the genre appearing every week on iOS.

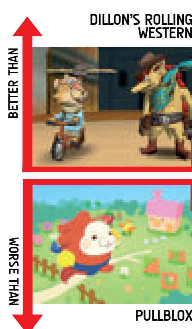
It's hard not to like the game though, just because it is so weird. The FMV movies that play in between each stage feel like food-poisoning hallucinations, and the cheery-yet-detached tone is as unsettling as it is engaging. Quite simply, other mediums just don't really get stuff like this.

If the game were free, it'd be essential – a hilariously odd throwaway game that everyone needs to play for five minutes. As a paid-for product, though, its curiousness can only carry it so far, until it's thrown head first into someone wearing thick-rimmed glasses and a sailor's hat.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 3DS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: Mitchell
PRICE: £5.39
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: DILLON'S ROLLING WESTERN



WORSE THAN: PULLBLOX

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

WHAT THE HELL: Explaining the mechanics of the game is easy, but the story? There's almost nowhere to start. If you like weird Japanese stuff, this ticks all the boxes.

VERDICT 5/10

BONKERS, BUT LACKS THE MECHANICS TO DO IT JUSTICE

Below: *Cognition* has third-person action, shooting even, but it's very much in the style of a point-and-click adventure. Timing and reactions are important here, but in these situations using the right object can mean the difference between life and death.

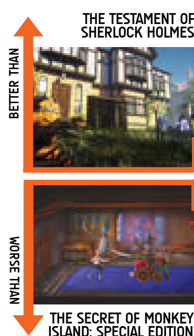




DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Reverb Publishing
DEVELOPER: Phoenix Online Studios
PRICE: £6.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows XP, 2GB RAM, ATI/Nvidia graphics card with 512MB RAM, 2GHz CPU, 2.5GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: THE TESTAMENT OF SHERLOCK HOLMES



WORSE THAN: THE SECRET OF MONKEY ISLAND: SPECIAL EDITION

ONE FOR POINT-AND-CLICK FANS TO GET THEIR THINKING GEAR WRAPPED AROUND

Cognition: An Erica Reed Thriller Episode One

Erica Reed is a hard-headed, red-headed, FBI agent solving crimes in Boston while coming to terms with her brother's untimely death at the hands of a serial killer. There's a familiar ring to this story: she's driven not just by her commitment to her career but by a need for closure on her brother's death. The elusive Cain Killer is still at large after three years of dogged investigation that has led Erica desperately – and deadly - close to nailing the sadistic murderer, so when the case is shut down by Director Davies, Erica's close personal attachment to it leaves her deeply resentful.

So, it's an interesting yet standard noir-type plot for an adventure game, although Phoenix Online Studios plays a number of tricks to make the first outing in this episodic series a great draw for the second. The cel-shading and comic-book style is a banker for this genre – nothing does drama and exposition in a cut-scene quite like a handful of overlapping frames, especially when the bad guy's lurking in the background. Secondly, Quick-Time Events are used sparingly but very effectively when pensive puzzling is replaced by action. These are no simple tests of your trigger finger, however: they will challenge your wits and resourcefulness. Within the space of a few seconds you have to assess the situation and decide what action to perform and what item in your inventory or immediately to hand you can use, otherwise Erica is likely to come to a gruesome end. And you're not spared those details either.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

SIXTH SENSE: Erica's visions are both a player and plot device, allowing us alternate interactions with her environment and an interesting way of unravelling the mystery of Cain Killer.

The trump card Phoenix plays is Erica's visions, which are the post-cognitive psychic ability to see the crime as it happened. This isn't automatic: they never offer completely obvious solutions and Erica normally has to be at the scene of the crime to use her gift. Oh – and naturally, they're sometimes completely arbitrary, offering glimpses of a possible future and therefore Erica is uncomfortable using them.

They can be activated by the player at almost any juncture, with potential clues emitting a woolly blue haze that sends Erica off into unknown regions of the human psyche. It seems a bit of a cheap trick at first, but as useful information is never guaranteed and even then, you still have to know what to do with it, this becomes one of the most interesting tools in Erica's arsenal.

Cognition's animation jerked around from time to time during our playthrough and there's a strange choice of icons for interaction (a briefcase for 'use with' and an open box for 'open'), but well-developed characters and an interesting plot make for a strong start to this point-and-click episodic series.



Above right: This is Terence, Erica's pet morgue technician who spends far more time with dead people than real people. *Cognition* has a very well-rounded and interesting roster of characters for you to interact with.

VERDICT 7/10

TUNE IN NEXT TIME FOR ANOTHER EXCITING EPISODE!

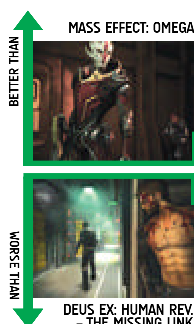
DISHONORED DLC OFFERS NO CHOICE BUT NEW CHALLENGES

Dishonored: Dunwall City Trials

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, PC
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Bethesda
DEVELOPER: Arkane
PRICE: 400 Microsoft Points
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
MASS EFFECT: OMEGA



WORSE THAN
DEUS EX: HUMAN REV. – THE MISSING LINK

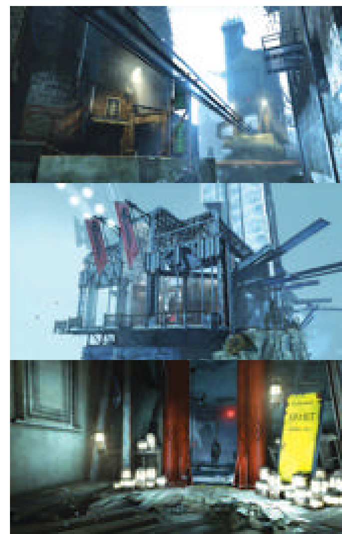
Though there's story-based content on the way for 2012's bright shining star *Dishonored*, those itching for a further fix of stealthy supernatural slaughter can get a few more kicks now with the release of *Dunwall City Trials*. There isn't a lot to the new pack; it is to *Dishonored* what the Challenge Maps are to *Batman: Arkham City*. Ten levels are available, all designed to test your skills with different facets of the game.

The beauty of the main game is that you have options, and it's a little jarring at first that *Dunwall City Trials* is pretty blunt about you having to do what you're told. You're forced to be stealthy in some missions, whereas in others you're told to go nuts with your weapons, or solve a puzzle. Once you get used to all that, though, *Dunwall City Trials* reveals itself to be a fun little download. None of the missions here is as compelling or as meaty as the ones in the main game, but they do lend themselves well to repeated plays and speed running, and maybe even open up alternative ways to play for those that went through the main game only the once. The best missions here are the assassination ones that force you to be stealthy, blinking up to chandeliers and waiting for some hapless muttering goon to pass by before you dash away into the shadows. The time bend massacre maps are fun too. A little less compelling are the combat missions, which throw wave after wave of blade fodder at you. *Dishonored* is a far better game if you choose not to go in slashing away like a wild pillock, and missions that focus on pure fighting tend to drag.

All that said, 400 points for a few hours more out of one of the best games of 2012 isn't a big ask, and those wishing to hone their skills will find ample opportunity to do so.

VERDICT 7/10
IT'S NOT ESSENTIAL BUT DUNWALL IS, ER, WELL DONE.

Below: *Dunwall City Trials* is built around repeated play. Improved performance leads to more shiny gold stars and a better place on the leaderboard.



POST-APOCALYPTIC BLASTER'S NEW DLC IS HOT STUFF

Rage: The Scorchers

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox 360
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Bethesda
DEVELOPER: Id Software
PRICE: 400 Microsoft Points
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
DEAD ISLAND: RYDER WHITE



WORSE THAN
BIOSHOCK 2: MINERVA'S DEN

It's easy to forget that behind the PC version's teething problems, needless vehicular padding and awful ending, Rage was a ballsy, satisfying shooter with a lot going for it. And *The Scorchers* is a timely reminder of just how underrated and overlooked it was.

Plot isn't important for this new single-player content – all you need to know is that you're given an excuse to go on a rampage and sort out a new tribe of pyro-happy bandits for another two or three hours. The new missions are fun and suitably grand (some stunning vistas provide a thrilling backdrop for the relentless gibbing), bolstered by the addition of a (hold onto your pants Id fans) beautifully vile new nailgun, which has an alternative fire mode that can leave your unsuspecting quarry's heads pinned to the walls. It's the best nailgun since the one in *F.E.A.R.* On the less psychopathic end of the spectrum, Id Software has made some improvements to the main game too. There's a newly included level select, so it's possible to skip past the filler and replay the good bits (and there are plenty of them). The game continues on after the bloody botch of an ending now too, so you can piddle about with any side quests you got bored of doing afterwards, if you consider that an improvement. There's even a new 'nightmare' difficulty level for masochists.

Basically *The Scorchers* is DLC done right. Other publishers make you fish out 1200 points for less than what you're given here. This is recommended, and bodes well for the inevitable *Doom 4*, once John Carmack's done piddling about with space rockets and porting *Doom 3* to his wild 25th Century Virtual Boy.



Above: *The Scorchers* is another showcase for Id's considerable technical wizardry (on the consoles at least). Getting a game this good-looking in addition to running at a constant 60 frames per second is an impressive feat.

VERDICT 8/10
THE SCORCHERS IS TAUT, EXPLOSIVE AND GOOD VALUE

Below: He's eaten three skulls and has gone all demon-like. Both the AI and your troops can achieve this state, but if your general gets it he becomes a whirlwind of samurai rage quite capable of taking on several units at once.





SAMURAI, CONDUCTING WAR THE HONOURABLE WAY: TAKING TURNS AND EATING EACH OTHER'S SKULLS

Skulls Of The Shogun

According to videogames (and we lay the blame partially on *Total War* for this perception), feudal Japan conducted wars between prefectures quite honourably. You arrange your infantry, mobilise your cavalry and order your archers to fire a volley at any enemy within range while the opposing general and his army patient wait their turn. Then, when you've regrouped your front line and taken your time to ensure your general isn't exposed, signal that you've completed your turn then brace yourself for the enemy round.

So there you go: *Skulls Of The Shogun* – it's a realistic samurai war simulator, then, except for the undead and underworld theme. You take command of a dead general trying to fight his way into the underworld alongside a handful of undead minions who have been inspired to take up arms and join your cause. Your units move fluidly across the battlefield rather than in incremental steps, taking an action and then using up any movement to retreat to relative safety: you move, strike and return. A nice and simple formula, the way turn-based strategy should be.

We vaguely recall something from that haze of D-grade GCSE history that samurai used to eat the skulls of their fallen enemies to gain power, and such is the case here. Kill a bad guy and munch on his fallen cranium for that unit to receive a heal and a boost to his maximum hit points. Eat three skulls of the fallen and not only will that unit be significantly more robust than its original form, the unit will turn demon, giving it two actions or attacks per round.

Ideally, what we like to see in a well-wrought turn-based strategy game is for it to rely on developing basic strategy and situation to provide the variation necessary to keep a player occupied for a 15-hour single-player stretch. *Skulls* does tend to rely quite a lot on gimmicks: potions dropped on the battlefield, a spell-casting fox monk unit summoned by sending a unit to 'haunt' a shrine and, to a lesser extent, paddy fields that generate rice as a currency that can be spent on buying more troops, troop buffs and more.

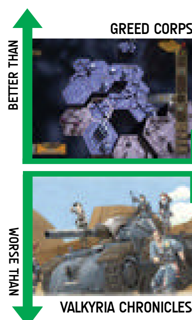
As turn-based hardcore gamers we'd have liked to have seen it focus on careful soldier deployment and protection of the general who is your most powerful unit and whose demise results in an instant victory for the enemy. But we can't fault *Skulls* for being a thoroughly compelling strategy game. Quirky too, playing to the videogame retro-chic and tongue-in-cheek humour that's popular especially among XBLA and digital games today. Despite the slightly overblown frills, there's plenty of depth to *Skulls* that will instantly engage any type of strategy gamer.

DETAILS

FORMAT: 360
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Windows Phone
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DEVELOPER: 17-Bit
PRICE: 1200 MS Points
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (2-4 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: No

BETTER THAN

GREED CORPS



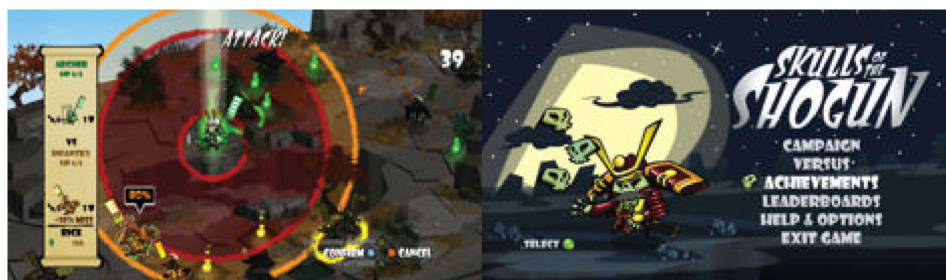
WORSE THAN

VALKYRIA CHRONICLES

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

TRIM THE FAT: We would like to play a more purist version of *Skulls Of The Shogun*, removing some of the special unit types and environmental pick-ups. In other words, drop the gimmicks.



Above: Gauging your range and whether your opponent can counter an attack is vitally important. Knockbacks too, as even a lowly soldier can defeat a general with a single blow if he's at the edge of a cliff.

VERDICT 8/10
GUNS FOR SHO

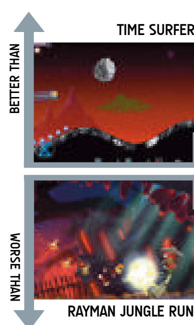
TOUCH THE DANGER ZONE

Joe Danger Touch

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Hello Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £1.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN TIME SURFER



WORSE THAN RAYMAN JUNGLE RUN

So few games that have been established with the traditional control pad have successfully made the transition to touch control; at least without totally compromising what originally made them great. *Joe Danger Touch* not only bucks that trend, it makes the whole process look easy, too.

Losing nothing in the conversion to iOS, *Joe Danger Touch* merely reinterprets how its gameplay should work with touch controls instead of reinventing the wheel, and the result is something that works remarkably well. Looking back, it could be argued that *Joe Danger*'s design was always one that would translate well to iOS, with its side-scrolling, platform-esque action appearing like the natural fit for tablets and phones. But it's promising to see just how well it fits onto Apple's devices.

Each of Joe's moves naturally fits into the touch mechanics. Tap once to jump, hold to duck, a quick swipe across the screen sees him perform his speed-inducing wheelie, everything has been accounted for. And with the screen never more than a few inches from your face it could quite easily be argued that this is how *Joe Danger* was meant to be played.

Visually, and especially on the newer screens of the iPhone 5 and iPad 2, *Joe Danger Touch* loses nothing when compared to its console cousin. Though some games have struggled to make the transition to the lucrative market of tablets and phones, *Joe Danger* does it with aplomb and gives itself the chance of competing on a much more fiercely fought scene.

Below: *Joe Danger*'s gameplay is perfectly formed. More mainstream XBLA and PSN games could learn from the clever and concise ways that Hello Games has reworked the gameplay and controls to work with touch.



VERDICT 8/10
JOE RIDES AGAIN

NINETY-NINE PROBLEMS?

Hundreds

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Semi Secret Software
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £1.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN ANGRY BIRDS



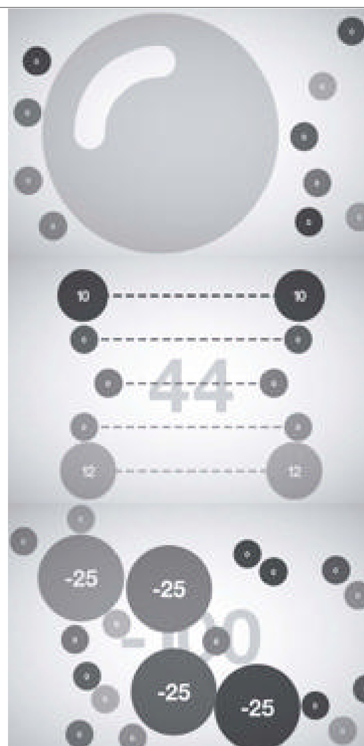
WORSE THAN CANABALT

***Canabalt* was a breakout hit on iOS and Flash for two very good reasons.** Firstly, it was incredibly simple to play and secondly, it looked slick while doing it. Finding the same sort of mixture for a follow-up might be compared to attempting to bottle lightning, but incredibly enough, *Hundreds* is the perfect spiritual successor.

Whereas *Canabalt* could be figured out within moments of the game beginning, *Hundreds* becomes increasingly more complex the more levels you complete, but the premise is just as basic. Each level presents you with a number of circles; touch one and it flashes red, grows in size and the digits within gradually make their way up to 100. If a red circle touches another, the game ends. Easy.

What's not so easy is just how complex *Hundreds* becomes; levels may start with a few moving obstacles that are easily overcome with careful planning, but things quickly become much more difficult. Once you're presented with connected circles, fast-moving ones or even poppable distractions, you'll not only be worrying about your fingers, but you'll be cursing that you haven't spent more time utilising basic arithmetic in the last few years.

It's amazing just how much leverage Semi Secret gets out of this one idea, too, but where *Canabalt* ruthlessly put your reflexes to the test, *Hundreds* manages the same while giving your brain and fingers a workout at the same time. Played on an iPad, with its HD screen, *Hundreds*' basic visuals are crisp and clean. Played on an iPad you're also afforded much more screen space than the iPhone, making things much, much easier. Either way, *Hundreds* is a fantastic distraction and a quick-fire way of getting an espresso-style shot of gameplay.



Above: *Hundreds* sucks you in with its simple gameplay and steady difficulty progression. What's surprising is how it does this with the minimum of visual feedback.

VERDICT 8/10
MATHS CAN BE FUN

WHY I ♥...

Gauntlet

STEVE ELLIS, CRASH LAB

*“**Gauntlet** was a great co-operative multiplayer game that was ahead of its time. Up to four players battled through a seemingly endless series of levels, the goal being to kill everything that moves, collect the treasure and find the exit. Constantly decreasing health meant that even if you played well, you still needed to feed it regularly with 10-pence pieces – especially when, as it so often announced, ‘Someone shot the food!’. The experience of four players crowded around a single screen, laughing and inevitably shouting at each other is something that I strived to recreate in the various games that I’ve worked on, and something that has been lost to some extent as games have moved online.”*



“The experience of four players crowded around a single screen, laughing and inevitably shouting at each other is something that I strived to recreate”

STEVE ELLIS, CRASH LAB



GAUNTLET

LEVEL 8

WARRIOR

SCORE HEALTH

15861 47809

VALKYRIE

SCORE HEALTH

0 0

INSERT COIN

WIZARD

SCORE HEALTH

0 0

INSERT COIN

ELF

SCORE HEALTH

0 0

INSERT COIN

1 COIN =
600 HEALTH

RETRO





BEHIND THE SCENES

TOTAL ANNIHILATION

"What began as a conflict over the transfer of consciousness from flesh to machines escalated into a war which has decimated a million worlds..." – so begins the iconic RTS. games™ chats to designer Chris Taylor



Released: 1998
Format PC-DOS
Publisher: GT Interactive
Developer: Cavedog Entertainment

KEY STAFF:
Chris Taylor
Lead designer & engineer
Jon Mavor
Graphics engine
Jeremy Soule
Music score
Clayton Kauzlaric
Art director

"I WAS SUCH a fan of Westwood's *Dune II* that I made a special trip down to the CES in Las Vegas to see their next game," begins Chris Taylor, lead designer and engineer of the pioneering real-time strategy game *Total Annihilation*, "and I was absolutely convinced it would be a huge success." The game in question was *Command & Conquer*, which went on to become a global smash. "So I quit my job, called Shelley Day and Ron Gilbert and told them I wanted to start a company. Instead they persuaded me to join them at their company, Humongous Entertainment."

Taylor was soon at work planning his project for new sub-label Cavedog. "I had my own vision for the game," he explains, "which was fundamentally based around real physics and with a [sci-fi] plot – I was a big fan of classic science fiction such as Asimov and Heinlein." His plot involved two opposing factions: the CORE, the supposedly benevolent rulers of the galaxy; and ARM, a band of colonial rebels upset by CORE's 'patterning' mandate – a law enforcing the compulsory transference of the human consciousness into a machine as a "public health measure". A chaotic war swiftly ensued.

So with the basis of the game in mind, Taylor continued to develop his ideas on how to make *Total Annihilation* stand out from a fast-growing RTS crowd. "I was staring at a blank design document and trying to think of ways to make the game a little different," he says, "and I knew that ultimately 3D was the future of games – so I wanted to bring this and the physics into the game. I also kept thinking about the king and queen in chess and how they were the focus of the game: the king was powerful, but the queen was *much* more powerful – yet you could still win if you lost her." Taylor's solution was to combine them into one unit in order to make the player feel invested in the game, as if they were actually on the field of battle: "Looking back, the Commander unit seems like an obvious decision, but at the time, I was really reaching!"

By the time Taylor began prototyping the engine in the autumn of 1995, he had already spent considerable effort studying weapon systems and battle tactics, specifically the key continued>.





Rather than a complex CG story, Cavedog had only the budget for a written introduction to each level.



I WAS A BIG FAN OF CLASSIC SCI-FI SUCH AS ASIMOV AND HEINLEIN


Some of Jon Mavor's impressive fire graphics in action.


This CORE base is developing nicely - if a little too closely packed.






Clicking on any unit gave a useful summation of its cost and potential.


Old ruins could also be converted into metal.




Each side's hatred for the other is often shown in the game.



MODDING AND MORE

■ THROUGHOUT the late Nineties and the majority of the last decade, a huge community built up around Cavedog's classic real-time strategy game, principally to promote online play and modding – whether it be of scenarios, maps or units. At the peak of the game's popularity there were several *Total Annihilation* 'supersites' in existence on the world wide web, such as Planet Annihilation, TA Designers and TA Universe, although only the latter still exists today. Thousands of new custom units and maps were designed by eager fans while the most impressive work remains the 70-plus full mods and total conversions, with TA Escalation and TA Zero currently the most popular of these. The remaining supersite, **www.tauniverse.com** is the number-one *Total Annihilation* resource, boasting a busy forum and thousands of downloadable mod items. You can even still play the game online.

WHAT THEY SAID...

There are lots of important points to cover here and they all lead to one fact... something that I should probably point out now rather than later: Total Annihilation is actually better than Command & Conquer

C&VG, August 2001

strategic element of elevation when employing heavy ordnance. "I wanted to create a game where controlling the high ground really mattered," he explains, "and that if you hid in the shadow of a mountain you could protect yourself from certain kinds of projectiles." Meanwhile other design ideas such as a hugely increased unit allowance and the wreckage from destroyed vehicles remaining on the battlefield were born more from his own experiences in playing RTS games. "I was frustrated by the [unit count] limits and wanted immense over-the-top battles that could enthral the player. As for the wreckage, if you watch documentaries on war, it's a huge aspect with roads and fields littered with tanks and other vehicles, blocking the path of other units. It gave a strategic advantage to the defender, which I wanted to reflect in *TA*." And Taylor was convinced more could be made of the obligatory radar screen that had already become a RTS staple. "I thought we should give the player the ability to use the radar screen to give orders and be able to gather intelligence from the way the blips moved on the screen." And more superficially, if no less impressive, was the weapon fire rendered onto the radar screen. "I coded that in five minutes. I was like, whoa, people are gonna love that!" he grins.

AN INEVITABLE CONSEQUENCE of the ambitious design was that the game's engine would have to be written from scratch. "Back then we didn't have 3D hardware, so had to rasterize the 3D using the CPU. We brought Jon Mavor in as a specialist to handle the rendering as it was such a key part of the game. He came up with some amazing solutions, buffering the graphics, anti-aliasing and incredible special effects." Together with Jeff Petkau (shift-clicking interface) and Brian Brown (unit scripting system), and under the guidance of Taylor, the engine slowly began to take shape. The next step would prove to be another groundbreaking one for the genre.

"We came up with the idea early on of the music changing tempo whenever a battle commenced and created a complex design for how it would work." recalls Taylor. When the *TA* designer met up with fellow Humongous employee and composer Jeremy Soule, they discussed at length how to incorporate this into an epic and exciting experience based around Taylor's idea that the music should have a grandstanding feel to it, along the lines of Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries*. "Jeremy composed two kinds of tracks, a set for battle and a set for building, and we just measured the amount of action on the screen with a simple algorithm and tried not to play the same track twice."

IT WASN'T UNTIL YEARS LATER THAT I COULD TRULY WRAP MY HEAD AROUND [ITS] SUCCESS

If we have made the development of *Total Annihilation* seem smooth, it couldn't be farther from the truth. "We were hair on fire for the first 20 months – then the game wasn't even properly finished when we shipped and we had to patch it for six months to get it right," admits Taylor. Even before then, the team had been working solid 12-hour days, seven days a week for some considerable time. "I think with the exception of Christmas holidays 1996, we more or less lived at the office…" Taylor leans back and sighs heavily. "Still, I loved it, and know now that it was a once-in-a-lifetime kind of experience."

>. A GAMING EVOLUTION

Total Annihilation > Dune II > Supreme Commander series



Westwood's own hit real-time strategy game, *Command & Conquer* was a big influence on Chris Taylor and the design of *Total Annihilation*



The *Supreme Commander* series focuses more on the all-important commander mech, as pioneered in *Total Annihilation*





Battlegrounds often became choked with the wreckage of the vanquished.

Despite the constant patching and bugs ("there were zillions of them!"), *Total Annihilation* was universally well received, especially considering the extreme levels of competition. "We hadn't realised that there were over 100 different RTS games in development at the same time as ours," grimaces Taylor, "and I suspect if we'd known how terrible the odds were, we might not have bothered!" Fortunately, his vision of a game fundamentally based around real physics, plus the other original design implementations, ensured *Total Annihilation* would never be labelled as 'just another RTS game'. Even Activision's similarly themed *Dark Reign*, released a few months prior to *TA*, failed to dent the team's confidence. "I remember playing it for maybe an hour one afternoon and feeling confident that they hadn't scratched the same itch that we were trying to scratch," remembers Taylor with a smile.


CHRIS TAYLOR
Designer

By the end of 1998, *Total Annihilation* had garnered countless high scores and game of the year awards. Chris Taylor, in the process of establishing his own new company, found it almost too hard to believe. "It wasn't until years later, looking back, that I could truly wrap my head around the success of the game. I was too busy figuring out how to get Gas Powered Games going to revel in the glory of *TA*." Consequently, Taylor wasn't around to answer one of the biggest issues Cavedog faced from customers: support. "The community sprang up very quickly and was already doing great things," he notes, "and they wanted us to help them. Unfortunately there was no way to pay for all the support so it became a complex business problem. I'd left Cavedog by then and in any case wasn't involved in management decisions."


Combining air and ground forces was often key to success.

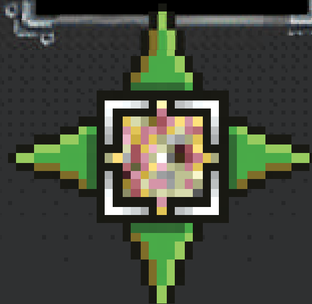


15 YEARS AFTER the release of *Total Annihilation*, this community still exists and Taylor sees this as its biggest influence on gaming today. "I built the game data around the idea that it would scan the hard drive and look for files it should load," he says proudly, "and that was a key decision from my experience on *Hardball 2* which did something similar, looking for team mods. It's amazing how working on sports games ultimately had such a positive effect on *TA* and the mod community, and then on the longevity of the game." In addition to the mod community, it's obvious *TA* has had a huge effect on Taylor's career since 1998. "It really set the bar high and gave me a great sense for how passion and love for the art of making a game can make it possible to create something truly amazing without having a zillion dollars to spend." Today his Gas Powered Games continues that love with the spiritual follow-up to *TA*, the *Supreme Commander* series, and Kickstarter projects such as *Wildman* (**https://wildman.gaspowered.com**). But we end our chat by looking back at *Total Annihilation* as he sees it today.

"In the end, I think we got lucky that nobody else at the time really went for the 2.9D real physics thing and that's what helped the game stand out. Sure, there were things that I'd wished we'd done. For instance, our budget never allowed for any CG movies that would have helped explain the plot and given the game better production values; but I think we still did pretty good. We spent a little over a million bucks when most other games were costing at least five times that. It was a very special time in my life – making our little miracle game."

THE LOOK OF WAR WITH JON MAVOR

"BASICALLY, I met Chris Taylor at GDC in 1996 and he recruited me to work on the team," says Jon Mavor, the technical wizard responsible for cramming in *TA*'s wealth of graphics. "And as soon as he showed me the initial stuff, I knew it was gonna be great. I turned down several other offers to take the job." Mavor would soon be working on the game's graphic engine, adding features and optimising performance, all using the CPU rather than the nascent 3D hardware technology. "Just supporting all these units was a performance nightmare," he grimaces, "so I just dug in and did my best!" Fortunately, Mavor could see their efforts were going to be for a good cause. "I still think the game is amazing and shows what can happen when you take cutting-edge design ideas and apply new technology to them. To this day, there are very few other games that get people as excited as *Total Annihilation*."



BEST BOSS

CONKER'S BAD FUR DAY
NINTENDO 64 [Rare] **2001**

■ IN PREVIOUS issues we've reflected on noteworthy bosses by observing how tough, obtuse, fiendish and even bastardly each has appeared on screen. Yet none has managed to kick up a stink quite like *Conker's Bad Fur Day*'s sweet corn-munching, opera-singing malevolence, who is, quite literally, a massive shit. Residing in the foul depths of Poo Mountain, The Great Mighty Poo is a slippery presence, slithering around our furry protagonist and slinging faecal matter at the pesky rodent in between bellowing a self-titled scornful tune. Challenge for the most part is absent, meaning you'll wipe up this brown menace with toilet paper within a few minutes, but his jovial front and soprano shriek amalgamate into a creature unlike anything we've come across before or since.

I AM THE GR


EAT MIGHTY POO

CONVERSION CATASTROPHE

The world's most embarrassing console ports, under the spotlight



TURBO OUTRUN





ORIGINAL RELEASE BOARD: **Sega OutRun Hardware** YEAR: **1989**
PUBLISHER: **Sega** DEVELOPER: **In-house**

SYSTEM FAILURE FORMAT: **Mega Drive** YEAR: **1992**
PUBLISHER: **Sega** DEVELOPER: **Tiertex Design Studios**

TURBO OUTRUN was the first sequel to Sega's legendary arcade racer *OutRun* and featured a number of changes. It introduced weather effects, chasing police cars, the option to tune up your Ferrari F40 during the race, and a turbo function. The latter granted players some extra speed but had to be used sparingly so as not to cause the engine to overheat – if this happened then the turbo button would be locked out until it had cooled down.

The most notable change, though, occurred to the race. The forking roads and multiple routes to the finishing line were dropped for a more linear competition that stretched across 16 US states. Despite polarising opinion among fans, *Turbo OutRun* was converted to numerous home systems, and what's surprising is that one of the worst conversions is found on a machine that should have really produced one of the best.

The Sega Mega Drive port of *Turbo OutRun* is widely seen as one of the worst racing games to appear on the console, and quite why Sega bothered to release it is a bit of a mystery. The first thing you notice about this conversion is the ropey visuals. Looking more like a Master System game than Mega Drive, its background graphics and badly drawn vehicle sprites lack detail and look nothing like their coin-op cousins.

What really kills this conversion, though, is the gameplay. It's tedious, slow and boring – and for an arcade racer, that's never a great combination. The car handling isn't great and the snaking, undulating tracks from the coin-op feel as flat as the Earth did during the pre-classical era, something which makes the 16 American states converge into one clumpy, monotonous race. The scaling effect also feels jerky, its difficulty is ridiculously unforgiving, and racing physics nonexistent: while the turbo makes your F40 faster, this increased speed has no effect on cornering or braking.

This is a poor conversion in every regard, and that it didn't even see a US release is probably telling of Sega's opinion of it. Sega Of America probably took one look at the game's depiction of its nation and canned its release, fearing that millions of insulted consumers would rethink their opinion of the Genesis and that the great work *John Madden* and *Sonic The Hedgehog* had done for the console's popularity there would all have been for nothing.



THE BREAKDOWN

1 The track designs are poor representations of the arcade game. Most of the stages are just flat roads that don't undulate wildly like those in the coin-op. To make matters worse, they also feature dull landscape graphics – like this stage here, which makes New York City look more like Barcode City.





2 The turbo function does feature in this conversion, but it isn't very well implemented. While it does make the F40 move a bit faster, the added speed seems to have no effect – or no noticeable one anyway – on braking or cornering. At least the speedometer pays attention.



3 The graphics in this 16-bit conversion would disgrace a Master System. Though colourful, the vehicle sprites are about as detailed as a crossword puzzle. You also get to enjoy roadside objects that resemble giant white dog turds, and jostle with rival racers who seem to drive with extremely flat tyres.

WHAT YOU SHOULD HAVE PLAYED IT ON

Format: **Commodore 64** Year: **1989**
Publisher: **US Gold** Developer: **Probe Software**



■ With fast gameplay and smooth scaling effects, the C64 game was a whole lot better.



■ WITH THE exception of some multi-loading, the C64 version is one of the best ports of *Turbo OutRun* around. With its impressive-looking graphics and vehicle sprites, catchy soundtrack, fast gameplay and smooth scaling effects, it puts the much later Mega Drive conversion to serious shame.

1997 1998 1999 2000

THE COMPLETE HI

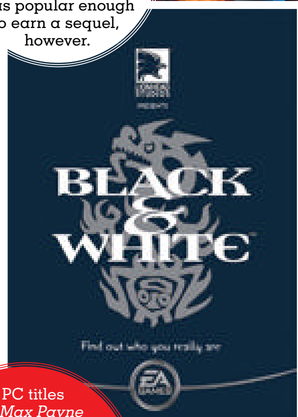


THE YEAR of 2001 was quite an important one for videogames, as it marked the release of the final home consoles of that generation. Sony maintained its vice-like grip on the market, but its peers weren't going down without a fight. Well, aside from Sega, whose Dreamcast bowed out in March. Nintendo's N64 was also on its last legs, but a smattering of decent games were still released for it, including the Japan-only *Animal Crossing*, *Dr Mario 64* (an enhanced update the NES game) and *Mario Party 3*. It was left for Rare to provide the last hurrah for Nintendo's machine and the developer didn't disappoint. *Conker's Bad Fur Day* was originally called *Conker's Quest* and had started off as a cute platformer in the style of Nintendo's *Mario* games. Rare eventually gave the game a more adult feel with copious amounts of swearing and parodies of popular movies, from *The Matrix* to *A Clockwork Orange*.

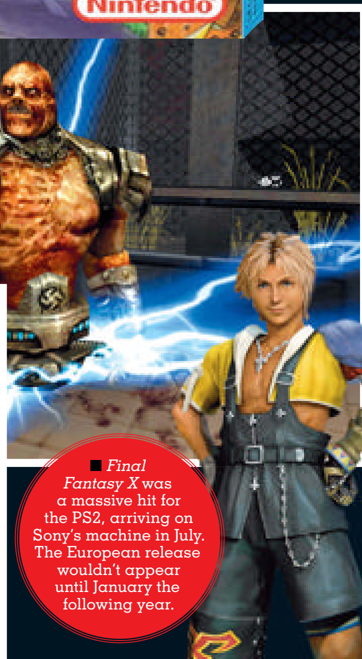
Although the N64 was in its final death throes, Nintendo was still in good cheer thanks to the release of two new consoles: the Game Boy Advance and GameCube. Nintendo's GBA handheld was first out the gate, receiving a Japanese release on 21 March, with the American and European releases occurring in June. The 32-bit handheld was effectively an enhanced SNES, ensuring a large number of ports appeared on the system – although interestingly, the first *Mario* game to arrive at launch, *Super Mario Advance*, was essentially an updated version of *Super Mario Bros 2*. Other launch releases included *Iridion 3D*, *Rayman Advance*, *F-Zero: Maximum Velocity* and *Mario Kart* clone *Konami Krazy Racers*. The machine racked up impressive sales figures, boosted by the fact it was also backwards compatible with the Game Boy and Game Boy Color. While it was criticised for not launching with a backlit screen, Nintendo made various hardware changes in the intervening years that included a lit screen as well as a new clamshell device for protecting the screen. The range of GBAs would eventually go on to shift over 81 million units. Not enough to trouble the Game Boy, or the later DS range, but still enough to maintain Nintendo's dominance of the handheld market.

If Nintendo's grip on the handheld market was firm, it was less sure in

YEAR IN 20



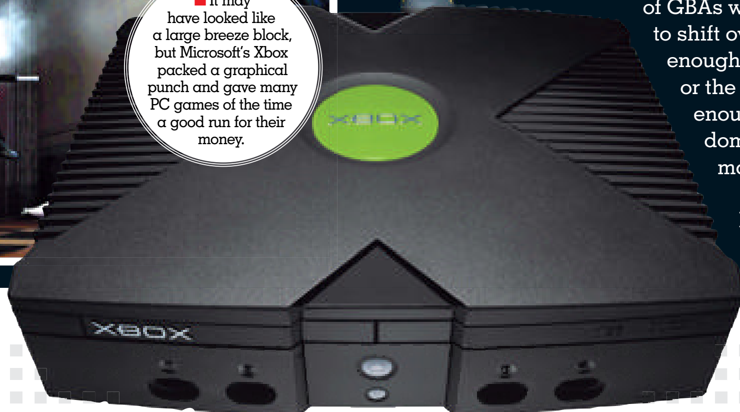
■ *Black & White* was another impossibly ambitious project from Peter Molyneux that didn't really live up to its early promise. It was popular enough to earn a sequel, however.



■ *Final Fantasy X* was a massive hit for the PS2, arriving on Sony's machine in July. The European release wouldn't appear until January the following year.



■ PC titles like *Max Payne* were still able to impress gamers, but the power of the Xbox and GameCube proved that the gap was closing between consoles and home computers.



■ It may have looked like a large breeze block, but Microsoft's Xbox packed a graphical punch and gave many PC games of the time a good run for their money.

STORY OF GAMES

the wake of Sony's dominance of the home console market. Nintendo's GameCube launched in September in Japan and was notable for the lack of a *Mario* release. *Luigi's Mansion* and *Wave Race: Blue Storm* were perfectly acceptable launch titles, but it was *Super Monkey Ball* – a game originally planned for Sega's Dreamcast – which turned out to be the console's surprise hit. By the time of the GameCube's US launch, those original three games were joined by ten other titles, ranging from ports like *Crazy Taxi* to sports releases like *Madden NFL 2002* and *NHL Hitz 20-02*. The most impressive offering was LucasArts' amazing sequel to *Star Wars: Rogue Squadron*, which boasted incredible visuals and allowed the player to fly an impressive array of Rebel fighters.

The GameCube would go on to score an array of incredible games in later years, ranging from *Resident Evil 4* to *Metroid Prime* and *Baten Kaitos*, but it was never able to compete with the market foothold that Sony had already established with its PlayStation 2. The GameCube would benefit with the death of Sega's Dreamcast, however, with a number of *Sonic* games and excellent updates like *Skies Of Arcadia Legends* eventually appearing on the machine.

REVIEW 01

Microsoft's Xbox was last to the party, arriving in November in the US and in Japan and Europe the following year, but the US giant proved it was a force to be reckoned with. The specs of the Xbox were impressive, while the likes of *Halo: Combat Evolved*, *Dead Or Alive 3*, *Project Gotham Racing* and *Oddworld: Munch's Oddysee* proved that Microsoft was keen on securing the hardcore gamer market. While Microsoft was never able to secure a notable presence in Japan, the original Xbox proved to be a critical calling card for the company, and while there were quite a few gaming missteps along the way – among them *Brute Force*, *Stubbs The Zombie* and *Voodoo Vince* – an excellent online service and a useful internal hard drive helped shape its predecessor as well as other later consoles.

Sega may have left the console market, but Microsoft proved a worthy replacement, ensuring that three competitors would continue to duke it out in the coming years. The Xbox also heralded the end of high-end PC gaming (for a few years at least), as it delivered a performance parity that would slowly start to put consoles back on a par with home computers. That wasn't to say the likes of *Max Payne*, *Civilization III* and *Black & White* weren't able to impress on PC. The times were changing, however, and consoles were once again becoming the main port of call for those seeking exciting game experiences.



Nintendo's handheld console was a worthy successor to the Game Boy and boasted a stunning selection of games. It was superseded by the Game Boy Advance SP and the Game Boy Micro.



Bungie's *Halo* was a massive success for Microsoft, spawning a multimillion-dollar franchise and giving the Xbox its first must-own game.

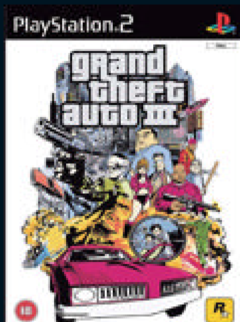


Star Wars: Rogue Squadron II: Rogue Leader was a bit of a mouthful, but there was no denying that it was a stunning GameCube launch game, with plenty of classic moments from the trilogy.

Nintendo fans were disappointed that the GameCube didn't launch with a *Mario* game, but anyone who played *Luigi's Mansion* was instantly assured of its quality.

DEVELOPER of the YEAR
Alex Seropian

Alex Seropian was originally a co-founder of Bungie. While he earned acclaim in Mac circles thanks to the likes of *Myth* and *Marathon*, it was the release of *Halo: Combat Evolved* that brought his name to the gaming masses. *Halo* was a revelation for the home console market, delivering the sort of intense multiplayer gaming that wasn't really available on home systems at the time. Seropian was key to the success of *Halo*, and it wasn't long before he became president of Bungie Software Products Corporation. He later left Bungie to form Wideload Games, which released *Hail To The Chimp* and *Stubbs The Zombie*.



EXTENDED PLAY: **2001**

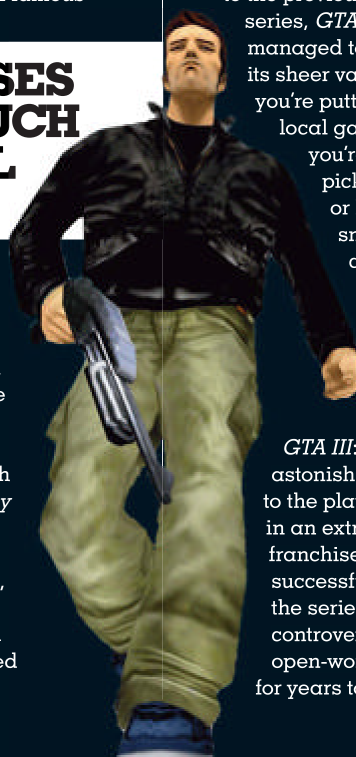
GRAND THEFT AUTO III

Each month we select one of the most interesting or important games from our year in review…. This month, we examine how Rockstar's third ambitious GTA made the jump to 3D

GRAND THEFT AUTO III helped Sony's *PlayStation 2* to become one of the most desirable consoles of all time. This in part was mainly due to the stunning new 3D world that it boasted, but was also down to the varied and exciting gameplay that Rockstar's latest series instalment offered. The *GTA* games had always felt realistic thanks to their gritty settings, but it was far more noticeable in *Grand Theft Auto III*. Like *Shenmue*, the streets were filled with people, but unlike Sega's game, many of these pedestrians appeared to have their own agendas as they moved through the huge sprawling city. Walking around and witnessing things like bag snatching or seeing fights break out was not uncommon, while your own ability to interact with the city was greatly enhanced compared to *Shenmue* or other similar games of the time.

It wasn't just Liberty City that was epic in scale. Every aspect of *GTA III* was massively ambitious, from its story to its mission design. Co-written by Rockstar co-founder Dan Houser, *GTA III*'s rags-to-riches story may not be the most original of tales, but it works thanks to fantastic cinematic framing and an extremely able voice cast. Rockstar used a number of famous actors, including Michael Madsen, Joe Pantoliano, Debi Mazar, Kyle MacLaughlan and Robert Loggia. It gave gravity to the script in a way other games couldn't and was continued for both *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* and *San Andreas*.

FEW FRANCHISES HAVE MADE SUCH A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION

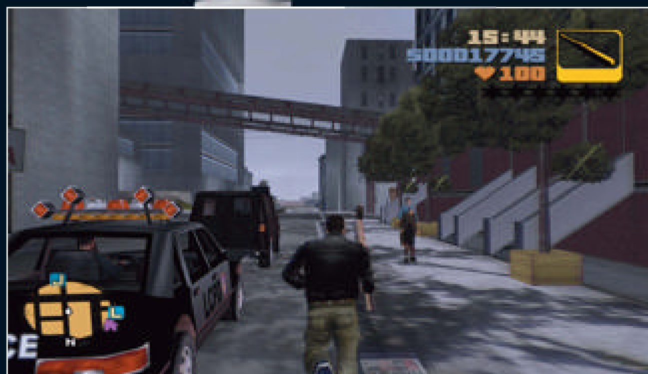


Although *GTA III* wasn't the first 3D sandbox world, it's arguably the best for its time, easily building on the mechanics first featured in Activision's *Hunter* and DMA Designs' (which later became Rockstar North) *Body Harvest* for the Nintendo 64. Although there weren't many new mission additions compared to the previous two games in the series, *GTA III* nevertheless managed to impress due to its sheer variety. One minute you're putting out hits for the local gang lords, the next you're spraying cars, picking up passengers or handling dangerous sniper missions. Of course, if you didn't want to follow *GTA*'s entertaining plot you could simply wreak havoc in the city.

And that's the real beauty of *GTA III*: it not only delivers an astonishing amount of choice to the player, but also does it in an extra dimension. Few franchises have made such a successful transition and while the series continued to court controversy, it also shaped the open-world adventure game for years to come.



A large number of well-known Hollywood actors ensured that the clichéd script delivered a lot more gravitas.



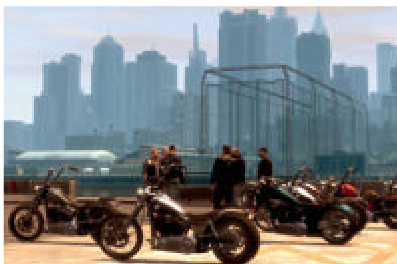
Police cars were changed in wake of 9/11 so that they didn't look like the vehicles belonging to the NYPD.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?



■ *GTA III* was followed up by the excellent *Vice City* (which was set in the Eighties and blessed with a fantastic soundtrack) in 2002, while 2004's *San Andreas* expanded the game world and introduced numerous RPG elements like stat boosting. Sony's PSP gained exclusive games in *Liberty City Stories* (2005) and *Vice City Stories* (2006), but they were both later ported to the PS2.

It would take the next generation before Rockstar unleashed its fourth *GTA* game, however, with *GTA IV* eventually appearing on PS3, PC and Xbox 360 in 2008. While it felt a little cut down compared to the epic scope of *San Andreas*, it was bolstered by two impressive add-ons – *The Lost And Damned* and *The Balled Of Gay Tony* – which reintroduced many of the cool missing elements from *San Andreas*. The world now impatiently waits for *GTA V*, while the franchise's legacy can be seen in everything from *Sleeping Dogs* to *Mafia*, *Crackdown* and *Just Cause 2*.



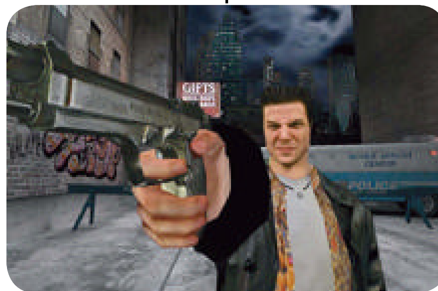
ALSO RELEASED THIS YEAR…

PHANTASY STAR ONLINE

■ Sega's Dreamcast continued to show its potential with this excellent MMORPG. While it was playable on your own, it really came alive when you explored the world of Ragol with other adventurers. Filled with epic bosses and desirable loot drops, the franchise has long outlived the console that first spawned it.



MAX PAYNE



■ REMEDY'S THIRD-PERSON shooter stood out thanks to its embittered central character, surprisingly strong (and dark) script and the use of bullet time. After wowing everyone in *The Matrix*, Remedy imported 'bullet time' into videogames. The result was electric, giving *Max Payne* an exciting action-packed edge that few other games could match.

SILENT HILL 2



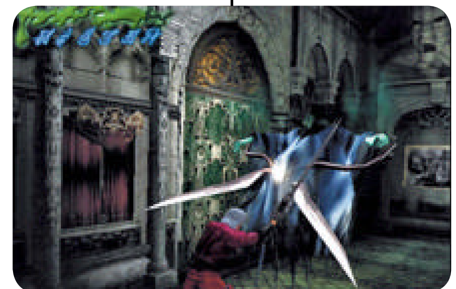
■ THE SERIES has long gone off track, but the second part of Team Silent's franchise remains its best. Brilliant scripting, some genuinely unsettling monsters and a host of damaged, believable characters make it one of the best survival-horror games of all time. We've yet to see any other game deal with adult themes so well.

HALO: COMBAT EVOLVED



■ WHILE IT failed to make the same impact on PC (it had far stiffer competition) *Halo* was a revelation when it launched on Microsoft's debut console. Epic level design, stunning visuals – that grass – and a range of satisfyingly chunky weapons made it a joy to play. A true console classic.

DEVIL MAY CRY



■ ORIGINALLY A cancelled *Resident Evil* project, *Devil May Cry* was turned into a new IP. Following the adventures of half-demon Dante, it boasted a dynamic, breathtaking combat system, insane OTT cut-scenes and a clever mission structure that would influence the action genre for years to come.

COLLECTOR'S CORNER

Your monthly guide to collectable retro treasures



DETAILS

FORMAT: ZX Spectrum
YEAR: 1988
PUBLISHER: US Gold
DEVELOPER: Ultimate Play The Game
EXPECT TO PAY: £50

ULTIMATE PLAY THE GAME: THE COLLECTED WORKS

If you'd like games™ to feature you and your prized possession in Collector's Corner, email us at retro@imagine-publishing.co.uk



EXHIBIT A: The compilation contains two tapes, or disks, featuring 11 classic games. Giving you an almost complete Ultimate collection in one hit, it marked incredible value.

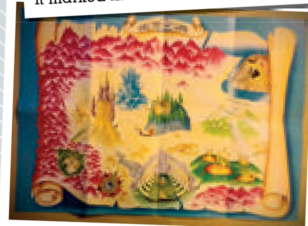


EXHIBIT B: This stunning map is often missing from packs today. Quite what it's for is a mystery. Maybe the Stampers had plans to build an Ultimate theme park.

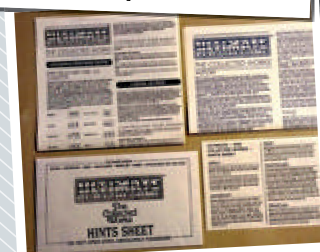
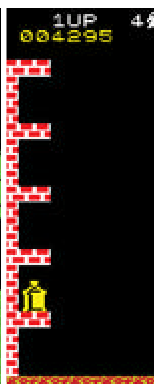


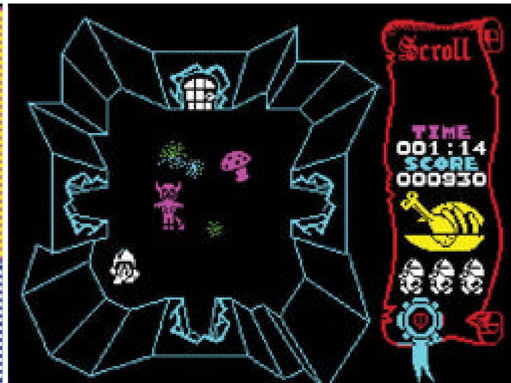
EXHIBIT C: Also inside were a hint sheet and a brief history about the company including an interview with the Stampers. Again, these are often absent from collections.













WHY IT'S RARE

ONE OF the rarest and most desirable compilations for the ZX Spectrum, *The Collected Works* is a lavish and highly collectable retrospective release that contains pretty much the entirety of Ultimate Play The Game's Spectrum back catalogue. Containing 11 games – *Psst!*, *Cookie*, *Tranz-Am*, *Atic Atac*, *Jetpac*, *Lunar Jetman*, *Sabre Wulf*, *Knight Lore*, *Alien 8*, *Nightshade* and *Gunfright* – it represented incredible value for money (£12.99 tape / £14.99 disk) and was an essential purchase for discerning Spectrum owners. In addition to the impressive selection of titles it contains, and the popularity of both Ultimate Play The Game

WORTH PLAYING?

THE STUNNING and eye-catching packaging of Ultimate's games mean you can't beat owning the original versions. But when you consider the variety and quality offered by the 11 games in this collection, it has to be a resounding yes. Before turning their attention to the NES with Rare in 1985, the Stamper brothers had established a solid reputation with their Ultimate Play The Game label for producing some of the most colourful, creative and magical games to grace home computers – from the frantic space shooter *Jetpac* and deadly colourful jungles of *Sabre Wulf* to the landmark Filmation series of isometric 3D games that began with *Knight Lore*. A brand new release from Ultimate was something many gamers followed intently in games magazines and would rush out to purchase on the day of release. All these iconic games and more are included in *The Collected Works*, with only *Underwurlde* (which it's believed was absent due to compatibly issues) and those titles licensed to US Gold missing. This compilation gives collectors not only a chance to own some of the most iconic computer games from the Eighties, but also those from one of its most prominent and respected developers.



and its founders Tim and Chris Stamper, what also makes this compilation so collectable is the exclusive supplementary materials inside. Often missing from packs bought today, these items include a sealed sheet of hints and tips; a leaflet containing excerpts from a rare interview with the Stamper brothers that was originally printed in *CRASH* magazine; and a stunning, and previously unpublished, map illustrated by Tim Stamper. *The Collected Works* can be seen as not only a greatest hits of Ultimate but also of the Spectrum too, and finding these sets in complete and good condition is becoming increasingly difficult for collectors.

FACT!

Though Spectrum-focused, Ultimate did release a series of C64-exclusive games. Most of which centred on the character Sir Arthur Pendragon.



I'VE GOT ONE

Name: **Mark R Jones**
Occupation: **Team leader at Zeno Ltd**

What is it about the Spectrum, and *Ultimate: The Collected Works* in particular, that is attractive to you?
I grew up playing these games but never owned the originals. I always wanted to but just didn't have the funds to buy them while I was at school. There's a magic to the Ultimate originals that they still hold now. And even when the standard started to slip, there was still a mystery about them. I was always jealous of anyone who owned the originals, and would drool over them as the artefacts from my childhood that they were whenever I saw one in someone's game collection.

Please tell us how/where you found the game?
When this collection was released in 1988 I was working full-time and could afford to buy it. It wasn't quite the same as buying the original releases but it was the next best thing. So I pottered off to a computer shop in the Arndale [shopping mall] in Manchester City Centre and bought myself a copy.

What condition was the game in and how much did you pay for it?
It was brand new so it was perfect. I handed over the £12.99 retail price and I'm the only person to ever own this copy.

Do you actually play *Ultimate: The Collected Works* and, if so, what do you think of it?
I do play the games on the collection, perhaps not every week, but I'll fire up one every now and again and have a go. I think *Jetpac* and *Sabre Wulf* are the ones I get the most mileage from. The thing with *Knight Lore* and *Alien 8* is that while they were groundbreaking when they came out, the slowdown that occurs when more than two things are moving on screen has dated them. It's painful!

Finally, would you ever consider selling the compilation or is it yours for life?
Oh no, I'd never sell it. While I now own all of the Ultimate games as original releases, this is the title that tops off any Ultimate collection. A collection is not complete without it. I will never sell any of my Ultimate games so this has to stay too. I'm a stickler for complete collections and my complete Ultimate collection is a thing of beauty, history and memories.

LIFE AFTER SINCLAIR:

THE SECOND COMING OF THE ZX SPECTRUM

The Spectrum was Sinclair's most successful product ever, with production lasting for a full decade. Yet six of those years were under Amstrad's watch. **games™** looks back at what happened when Alan Sugar's men got their mitts on the much-loved micro



THE DEATH OF SINCLAIR WAS REPORTED AT 3AM ON 2 APRIL 1986. It was at this ungodly hour that Amstrad finally completed the acquisition of the ailing Sinclair computer business. It marked the end of a marathon eight-day meeting where solicitors and bankers working for both sides thrashed out the details of the deal.

The Sinclair purchase was formally announced at a press conference the following week. It was revealed that Amstrad had secured the rights to sell existing Sinclair computers and manufacture new ones under the Sinclair brand. For this privilege, Amstrad paid just £5 million, plus a further £11 million to buy up the existing Sinclair stock. Of the two bosses, Amstrad's Alan Sugar was almost certainly happier than Clive Sinclair. The Cambridge whiz-kid had managed to save his company from impending bankruptcy, yet the Brentwood bear had just sauntered off with the sale of the century. Before the buyout, Amstrad claimed 20 per cent continued>



Launched quickly, in time for Christmas 1986, the new +2 model was described by Alan Sugar as a Spectrum with a "glued-on tape recorder".

of the UK computer market. With Sinclair under its wing, that figure shot up to 60 per cent. Sugar was now firmly in control.

At the press conference, a BBC News reporter suggested to Sir Clive that his company was extremely good at invention, but not so great at marketing. "Well I'm sure that's true," he answered, in a surprisingly dignified mood considering the circumstances. "The point is that we're good at the initial marketing, the innovative marketing – that's our job. We're just not in the same league as Alan Sugar and other companies when it comes to mass marketing worldwide. We just don't have those skills."

OUT WITH THE OLD

IT WOULD BE FASCINATING TO SEE WHAT WOULD HAPPEN TO THE SINCLAIR BRAND WHEN AMSTRAD SPRINKLED ON SOME OF ITS MARKETING MAGIC AND SORTED OUT THE SUPPLY AND DISTRIBUTION CHAINS. However, more than one commentator questioned Amstrad's research and development credentials. Would the company properly develop the assets it had acquired, or was the famous Sinclair inventiveness dead and buried?

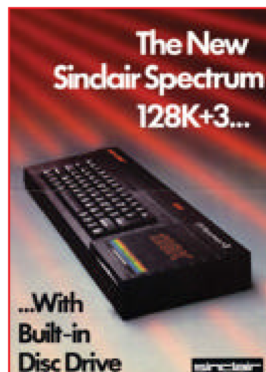
> **WOULD THE COMPANY PROPERLY DEVELOP THE ASSETS IT HAD ACQUIRED, OR WAS THE FAMOUS SINCLAIR INVENTIVENESS DEAD AND BURIED?**

Following the sale, there was no mass exodus of Sinclair staff to Amstrad. In fact, only one person made the move. "Nobody wanted to work for Sugar," says Rupert Goodwins, who joined Sinclair in early 1985 and worked on the Spectrum 128 computer. "There was a lot of snobbishness and everyone thought they had a better plan. I was 21 and nowhere near as confident and well connected as most of the other staff, so I was more desperate! I was the sole person to move across to Amstrad with the corpse."

Aural Displeasure

Major changes to the +3 ROM caused compatibility problems and muffled sound

THE CHANGES TO the +3 ROM were quite significant and this introduced some compatibility problems with existing Spectrum software (mainly due to the accidental removal of 'empty' ROM space that a number of games used for interrupt vectoring). The +3's real show-stopping bug, however, was found in its hardware. Due to a missing resistor in the sound circuitry, AY audio output was horribly distorted. This problem was fixed in later updates, which was of little consolation to those who had picked up an early-issue machine that sounded like the AY chip was being smothered by a small pillow.







■ The Spectrum +2 Action Pack came bundled with a light-gun and a number of shooting games.



■ A 1988 magazine ad included the odd claim that 128K of memory "gives you the power to outsmart the most sophisticated enemy".



■ British boffin, Sir Clive Marles Sinclair.

Even before Rupert turned up for his first day at Amstrad HQ, his new boss had already cherry-picked the Spectrum and ditched the QL. The Sinclair business machine had been beset by problems ever since it launched in 1984 and Sugar wasn't about to try to salvage it. Rupert agrees that this was the right thing to do. "We had a rule at Sinclair that nobody was allowed to start a sentence with 'What the QL should have been was…'. If it had had a proper keyboard and proper floppies from the outset, then it might have become the smarter equivalent of Amstrad's PCW 8256, but by the time Sugar came along it was far too late."

So the QL was KO'd, but what about those mysterious prototype machines like Pandora and Loki that were in development at Sinclair at the time of the sale? Didn't Amstrad want to consider any of those potentially exciting prospects? The story goes that Sugar was demoed Pandora, the portable Spectrum 128 with a curious flat-screen monitor, and was less than impressed with what he saw. Computer journalist Guy Kewney later asked him if he would be pursuing Pandora, to which he responded: "Have you seen it?"

"Yes," answered Kewney.

"Well then," said Sugar.

The fate of Loki was less clear. This 8-bit Spectrum-compatible computer was supposed to offer Amiga power at a fraction of the cost. Despite much of Loki's hardware being prototyped, Rupert confirms that it was nowhere near finished at the time of Sinclair sale. Rather than faff around with unfinished kit, Amstrad was looking to make a quick return on its investment and needed a new Spectrum model in the shops in good time for Christmas 1986. This meant that production had to start by the end of July that year at the very latest. The Sinclair deal was done in early April, so that gave Amstrad's engineers just 16 weeks to come up with something. The result was the Spectrum +2, the computer Sugar affectionately and rather accurately described as a Spectrum with a "glued-on tape recorder".

NONPLUSSED

■■■ **EARLY PRESS REPORTS SUGGESTED THAT THE +2 MAY HAVE ITS MEMORY BOOSTED TO 256K, AND MIGHT EVEN FEATURE A GEM-LIKE GUI, BUT THIS PROVED TO BE WISHFUL THINKING.** The +2 was essentially a Spectrum 128 in a CPC-style case with an integrated 'datacorder'. Compared to the 128's quirky styling, the +2 was much more corporate style – a monolithic slab of grey plastic that looked every inch an Amstrad product. The upside of this was that the Spectrum was finally graced with a proper keyboard. The tape deck was a sensible addition too, although it wasn't without its problems. There was no tape counter, for a start, and the lack of a volume control caused problems with tricky-to-load tapes (there was no option to connect an external tape player either). A couple of joystick ports were also added – great for gamers, although Amstrad pulled a fast one by rewiring the pins on the sockets so that only Amstrad's own poor-quality SJS joysticks could be connected. Third-party manufacturers immediately countered this by releasing adaptors and their own compatible sticks.

Under the hood, the circuitry was tidied up and some re-engineering was done to improve reliability (the ULA display chip was given its own heat-sink, for instance). This work was overseen by Richard Altwasser, a recent Amstrad recruit who continued>



■ The formidable Amstrad boss, Sir Alan Michael Sugar.




Amstrad software engineer Cliff Lawson, who worked on the CPC and Spectrum computers.

was ideally placed as he'd been part of the Spectrum's original design team.

"Richard was a jolly good electronic engineer," remembers Amstrad Z80 programmer Cliff Lawson. "He advised on the +2 design to make it more reliable than the 128's heavily cost-engineered design. Part of Sinclair's problems was its high rate of returns. Amstrad on the other hand managed to make a profit in the electronics business because of well-thought-out design that gave it one of the industry's lowest return rates. The tape deck had been one of the features that the CPC 464 was lauded for, so it made sense to do the same thing with the Spectrum. Similarly, the original Sinclair keyboards were seen as a reliability issue so Amstrad's knowledge of keyboard engineering was used to improve that."

The +2 was formally unveiled on 3 September 1986 at the Personal Computer World show in London. It went on sale later that month, priced at £149. The Spectrum 128 had launched in January at £179, so no one could accuse Amstrad of ripping people off.

On powering up the +2 there was very little to distinguish it from a 128. The system ROM itself was almost identical to the 128's, ensuring the same level of compatibility with the huge Spectrum software library. "Compatibility was very important," says Rupert, who was responsible for tweaking the ROM in the +2. "Making as few functional changes as possible kept the development costs and time-to-market down with minimal risk. For the most part, I thought that the +2 was a huge dollop of common sense. It was a very quick exercise in getting the costs down, freshening the brand and making it look new. The +3 with its disk drive was pretty much in mind all the time, but as it would take longer to develop and test, the +2 had a role to play in keeping the Spectrum brand alive."


Rupert Goodwins was the only Sinclair employee to join Amstrad following the sale.

DISK ASSESSMENT

THE +2 DID MORE THAN MERELY KEEP THE SPECTRUM ALIVE; IT WAS LIKE AN ADRENALINE SHOT IN THE ARM. Amstrad reported that more than 300,000 +2s had been sold in just six months. Sugar's outfit had successfully repackaged the Spectrum, and in doing so, rebuilt confidence in the Sinclair brand. The press and public now looked ahead to the next model, the +3, which would feature a built-in disk drive along the same lines as the Amstrad CPC 6128. It would be fascinating to see what Amstrad would do given additional development time. Would it take the opportunity to meaningfully develop the Spectrum?

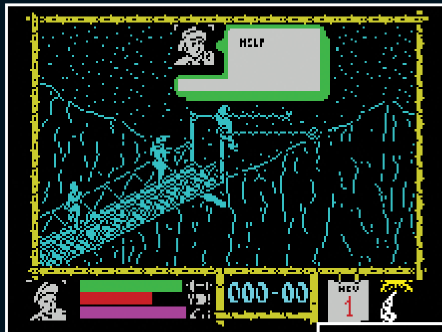
THE PRESS AND PUBLIC NOW LOOKED AHEAD TO THE NEXT MODEL, THE +3, WHICH WOULD FEATURE A BUILT-IN DISK DRIVE

The answer was a disappointing no. Released in July 1987, the +3 came with a disk drive – the not-so-common 3-inch variety, as championed by Amstrad – and very little else. There were some extra ports around the back – a parallel printer interface, a socket for a second disk drive and a cassette connector – but anyone expecting a major advancement of the Spectrum's ageing architecture was left wanting. The graphic and sound capabilities were the same and the amount of RAM remained at 128KB. On notable addition was CP/M compatibility, which brought the +3 even further in line with Amstrad's existing 8-bit range.

The job of updating the +3 ROM was shared by Rupert and Cliff. Rupert says: "My work involved a lot of the disk drive code, the editor and screen handling, the paging system, production test code and so on. Locomotive Software handled a lot of the CP/M and higher-level disk functions, as they'd already done that for CPC and PCW machines. The result was a real Frankenstein's monster of bolted-together software components, but that was always a great Spectrum tradition anyway." Cliff adds: "I got involved because the job was effectively to integrate Locomotive's disk operating system, which was something I was already familiar with." continued>

ONLY ON THE 128

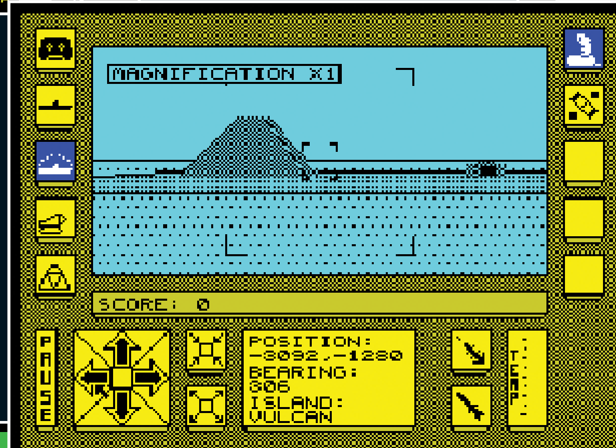
Despite the introduction of the 128K Spectrums, many publishers played it safe by ensuring that their games would run on the bog-standard 48K machine. However, there were some games for which the bigger memory Speccy was mandatory. Here are five of the finest examples…



WHERE TIME STOOD STILL (1988)

Developed by Denton Designs and published by Ocean, this sprawling isometric adventure dropped players into a world where danger and excitement lay around every corner. This was the first title to truly make use of the expanded 128K memory and is perhaps the original Spectrum 'Mega Game'.





CARRIER COMMAND (1989)

It reportedly took Realtime Games two years to convert its 16-bit classic to the 128K Spectrum, but the results were worth the wait. Featuring fast, filled-vector graphics and most of the gameplay features from the original, it was an amazing piece of work that pushed the limits of the hardware.

NARC (1990)

Ocean was the first software house to drop support for the 48K machine entirely, paving the way for some classy arcade conversions like *NARC*. The graphics may have been monochrome, reducing the gore score considerably, but there was still enough on-screen carnage to satisfy even the most jaded gamer.

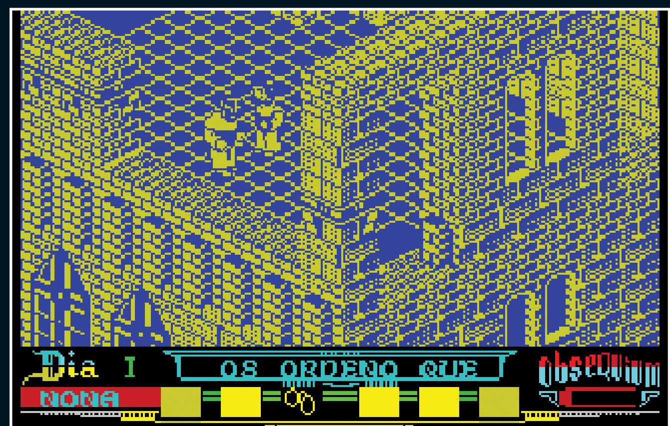
```
GRASSY WILDERNESS
On The Path
You are on a gravel path leading north to two snow
capped mountains. To the west is a dying forest.
Eastward is a vast, grassy plain and the path also
continues southward.
>EAST
Grassy Wilderness
You find yourself in a vast wilderness of grassy plain
extending to the limit of your vision in every direction.
Kronos the magician zooms past on a circular stone
platform that hovers above the ground, executes a steep,
banked turn and glides to a halt in front of you.
"Greetings, stranger", Kronos says in a deep, rich voice.
>EXAMINE PLATFORM
The platform is a circle of stone about one metre across.
"I am having great trouble in finding someone to perform
an extremely simple task and I wonder if you would help
me out. If you deliver this sealed letter to king Erik of
kerovnia, you will be well rewarded when I next meet
you on your travels and I would be forever indebted to
you."
The magician then offers you a sealed note.
>TAKE NOTE
```

THE PAWN (1987)

It's fitting that a game that made a low-key debut on the Sinclair QL should be released, two years later, to such acclaim on the Spectrum 128K. It may have lacked the location graphics from some of the other versions, but nonetheless this clever, funny and downright devious text adventure was an essential purchase.

LA ABADIA DEL CRIMEN (1988)

Based on Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose*, *La Abadia del Crimen* (The Abbey of Crime) was a thrilling murder mystery released exclusively in Spain. The medieval monastery setting was brilliantly depicted with isometric graphics and the game exuded a tangible sense of atmosphere and foreboding.



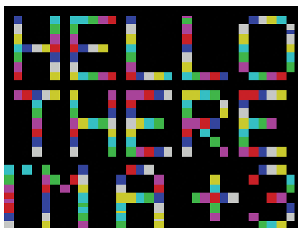
The hardware inside was further simplified by Amstrad, with a reduced chip count making it cheaper to manufacture. Sadly, Amstrad wasn't willing to pass these cost savings on. To incredulous cries from the press, public and retailers, the +3 launched with a wallet-busting price tag of £249. From the early days of the ZX80, Sinclair computers had traditionally represented good value for money and this was anything but. The price was dropped to £199 prior to Christmas, but even then the +3 couldn't really be recommended as an upgrade path for existing Spectrum owners. If you were a serious user then you were probably better off buying a third-party disk system such as the MGT Plus D or Opus Discovery instead.

SOUPED-UP SPEC

THE +3 WAS THE MOST ADVANCED SPECTRUM TO DATE, YET SHOULD AMSTRAD HAVE DONE MORE WITH IT? Surely there was an argument for beefing up the video hardware? The Spectrum's idiosyncratic display, colour clash and all, had remained unchanged since the computer launched in 1982. Even if Amstrad couldn't justify the introduction of dedicated graphics hardware, it could have at least added some additional video modes. The irony here is that the Timex 2068 computer – an enhanced Spectrum 48K developed in 1983 for the US market and parts of Europe – already featured an improved ULA that offered higher screen and colour resolutions while retaining compatibility with the standard Spectrum display (it even featured a hi-res 512×192 mode which supported 80-column text – perfect for CP/M applications). Sinclair was using the 2068's ULA in the Pandora portable computer, so perhaps Amstrad was too hasty in dismissing it out of hand.

Cliff reveals that the +3 was never even considered for any graphical upgrade: "The only goal of the design was to make a disk-based machine available and that is what the +3 delivered. Amstrad had learned that people much preferred the reliability and speed of a disk operating system, so engineering one onto the +2 to make the +3 was a natural next step. There would have been little point developing the graphics or whatever, as it would then start to impinge on the CPC market. It would also increase the retail cost and by this time the higher end of the market was already looking busy with the Atari ST and Amiga. The type of customer who was willing to pay top dollar was most likely to pay that bit extra to get access to 16-bit performance that no 8-bit was ever going to deliver."

Rupert concurs: "The focus was on making better and cheaper hardware that made it easier and nicer to use existing software. I don't think we expected



It's alive! This Easter egg was sneaked onto the +3's ROM chip.



The 208-page manual even told how to fit a mains plug – one wasn't supplied.

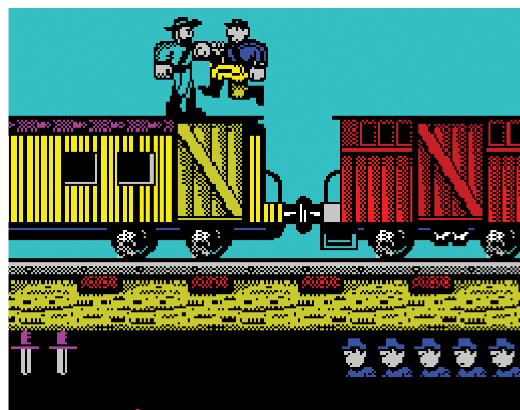


The +2 boot screen. The 128's Tape Tester option was removed.



Disky Business

Only a few game publishers provided extra features in the +3 disk versions



The train scene in Infogrames' *North & South* was exclusive to the Spectrum+3 disk version.

IT WAS HOPED that the release of the +3 would usher in bigger and better games that took advantage of the disk format. Many firms did release games on disk, but most were identical to the tape versions so just offered faster loading times.

There were a small number of exceptions, however. The +3 versions of *Shadow Of The Beast*, *Golden Axe*, *P-47 Thunderbolt* and *Back To The Future III*, for example, displayed extra scene-setting screens pulled straight from disk, while some titles such as *Thunder Blade*, *Mr Heli*, *Dynasty Wars* and *Mercenary* featured AY sound that was exclusive to disk. A standout effort was the brilliant *North & South* from Infogrames, as the disk version included the train hijack scene that was missing from the tape version.

For more serious gamers, various Level 9 adventures including *Lancelot* and *Scapeghost* displayed location graphics on disk (they were text-only affairs on tape). Magnetic Scrolls, meanwhile, ditched tape completely for all its Spectrum games bar *The Pawn*, so the only way you could play classics like *The Guild Of Thieves* and *Jinxter* was if you owned a +3.





Sir Clive Sinclair went on to invent the Z88 computer.

THE FOCUS WAS ON MAKING BETTER, CHEAPER HARDWARE THAT MADE IT EASIER AND NICER TO USE EXISTING SOFTWARE

that the games industry, which was moving on from 8-bit in general, would want to spend much time writing for modes that would never be available to more than a small subset of Spectrum owners. Plus, extra modes with higher resolution aren't much good, especially for games, if they're still being driven by a Z80A with no hardware support. And once you start adding that, you're designing a new computer. Who wanted a new 8-bit computer in the latter half of the 1980s?"

END OF THE LINE

AMSTRAD CEASED PRODUCTION OF THE +3 IN OCTOBER 1990. It was rumoured that the +3 was dropped to clear the way for Amstrad's new 6128+ computer, but reports suggested that +3 sales had been on the wane for a while. All told, just 15% of Spectrum owners had a +3. Sales of the +2, meanwhile, were still buoyant and Amstrad would continue running the production line until April 1992.

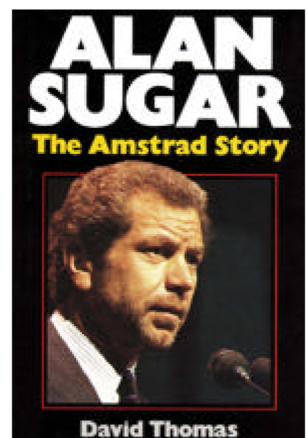
So should Amstrad be praised for keeping the Spectrum alive for as long as it did, or criticised for cynically milking the machine without really advancing the hardware?

"My personal opinion is that it was a nice little revenue earner for not much upfront cash injection," says Cliff. "At the time of the acquisition the Spectrum had the largest share of the home computer market in the UK, so it just made commercial sense to broaden the range offered by Amstrad without the cost of developing its own low-end model. While the Spectrum was great for Amstrad, it would never have been the model that it put effort into developing anyway. Amstrad's home computer was the CPC and that's where all its true development effort – and in-house expertise – was focused."

When asked the same question, Rupert deliberates slightly. "It's a bit of both," he finally says. "I'm more inclined to blame Sinclair for arranging the Spectrum's long, drawn-out drift into obscurity. Although I'd been a serious Spectrum fan before joining Sinclair, I never saw it as an untouchable icon of wonderfulness, and my illusions about the god-like status of Sir Clive didn't survive too long once I moved to Cambridge. So I always thought that to be competitive it had to develop, and that Amstrad had some really good ideas about making computers that people wanted to use. Sinclair had an underlying cynicism about its customers while Amstrad knew what people wanted and gave it to them.

"I would have liked to have seen an ultra low-cost Spectrum. I would have liked to have seen a portable Spectrum. But in the end, there's only so much you can do with an architecture designed in 1981. When did Spectrum production stop? 1992? That's not a bad run, is it?"





For the inside story on how Amstrad swallowed up Sinclair, track down David Thomas's *The Amstrad Story*.



ESSENTIALS

10 OF THE REBOOTS WE DREAM ABOUT

■ 2013 has kicked off an incredibly exciting year for gaming with a handful of franchise relaunches. While we are currently loving the new style of *Devil May Cry* and are incredibly excited about Lara's new *Tomb Raider* adventure, we can't help but feel like it's time to hit the reset button on a few tired series desperately in need of breath of fresh air. Here are the ten reboots that **games™** dreams about.

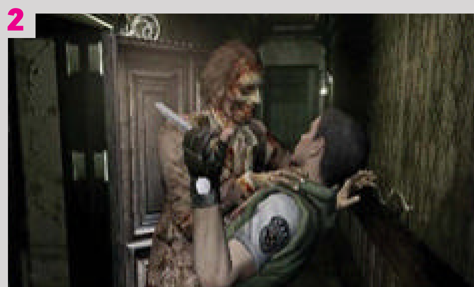
1



4



2



3



5



Unreal Tournament
Developer: Epic

1 *Unreal Tournament* is still to this day one of the greatest first-person shooter experiences you could ever hope to find, so it saddens us to see the slump the series has gradually fallen into. While ambitious sequels have introduced vehicles, ever-crazier arsenals of weapons and new maps, these additions never do enough to justify the sequels' existence. The landscape of multiplayer gaming has changed considerably in the last 14 years, and it's time Epic reinvigorated the series. We aren't saying it should ditch the arena-based combat and introduce a cover system, but it is certainly time we had some new modes, grittier visuals and new interesting ways to kill your friends.

Resident Evil
Developer: Capcom

2 2012 was certainly a polarising year for *Resident Evil* fans. While the 3DS's *Revelations* was a welcome addition to the franchise, *Resident Evil 6* seemed to be the last straw for the legions of jaded fans. Capcom has run out of steam and is at risk of letting the series collapse under the weight of its convoluted story and unreliable mechanics. Imagine a return to heart-crippling horror, to the claustrophobic corridors of the mansion. Everything Capcom needed was within the borders of Raccoon City, and it's finally time the publisher wiped the slate clean, introduced a new protagonist, rebooted the characters and rewrote the story.

Road Rash
Developer: EA

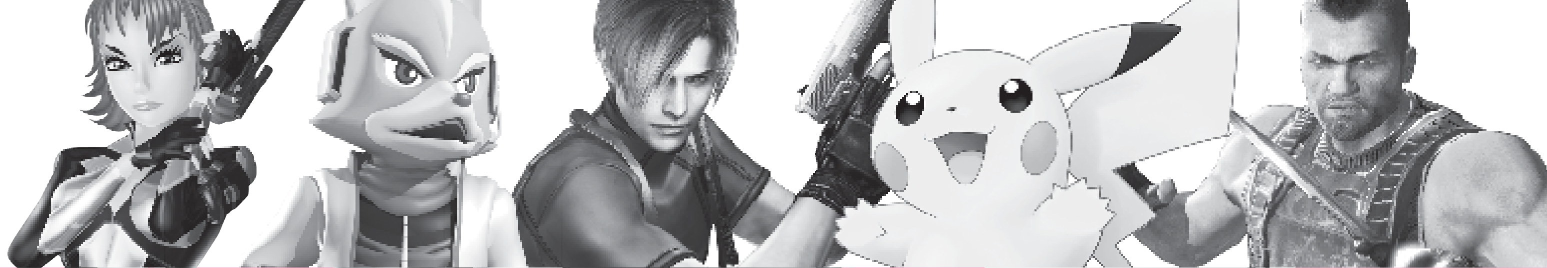
3 *Road Rash* never got the love that it deserved. In a generation where developers have been looking for a way to add action and violence to racing games, *Road Rash* can offer the high-octane thrills they are looking for. Imagine *NFS Most Wanted*, but replace the cars with bikes and the nitrous oxide with crowbars are you're onto a winner. Competitive multiplayer is a must and, if presented right, could offer the ultimate party racer – with friends desperately racing for first and fighting for survival along all manner of scalable tracks. A *Road Rash* reboot was planned and canned years back, but there's no reason it couldn't make a startling comeback.

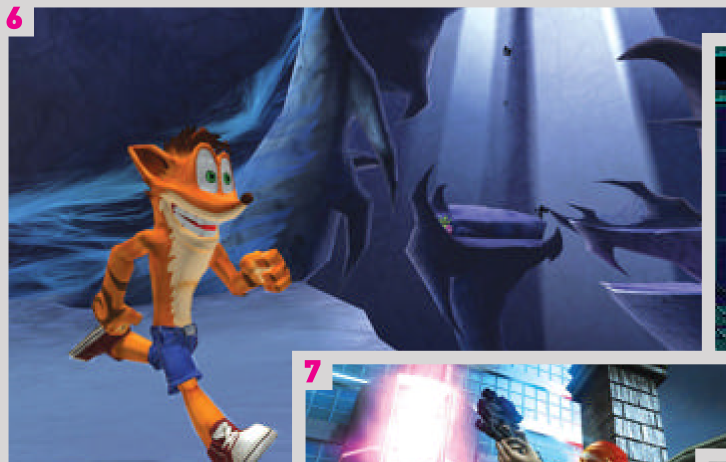
Pokémon
Developer: Nintendo

4 Despite its continued success, the *Pokémon* series has been stagnating for a very long time. *Black 2* and *White 2* were the biggest signs, indicating Game Freak may have run out of ideas, and Pokémon designs, after 17 years of developing shockingly similar titles. We still love *Pokémon*, but that doesn't mean we don't want to see Nintendo push the boundaries of its hit series. It's time for it to strip back to the essential 150, move into the third dimension and give players the chance to explore Kanto like they've never done before. The Wii U and 3DS are the perfect vehicles for Nintendo to explore the potential of its systems; it's just a question of whether it would take the risk.

Silent Hill
Developer: Konami

5 *Silent Hill* was the king of horror games, but the years haven't been good to the ageing series. Once renowned for its crippling psychological horror, it's now recognised for its laughable attempts at slowly introducing action elements to the survival-horror template. Konami needs to remember what made the series so popular and get it back to that – a game so terrifying it forces you to turn it off, but so engaging that you always came back for more. The *Amnesia* series is a good example of what modern games can do with the genre, but Konami needs to take a risk and take the series back to square one to recapture the excitement *Silent Hill* used to generate.




6



9




7



8


10

Crash Bandicoot
Developer: Naughty Dog

6 *Crash Bandicoot* seemed to just fade away. It's been five years since the last outing, and over a decade since it meant anything. Platform games seem to have lost their way, but with the success of *Skylanders* and *Rayman Origins* lingering in our minds, we can't see why *Crash* couldn't make a triumphant return. It would need to return to the basics that made it so popular in the first place, stripping away much of the extended cast and gimmicky mechanics of later instalments. Of course, we'd love to see Naughty Dog return to rescue its series, but it is understandably busy with *Uncharted* and *The Last of Us.* Still, we can dream.

Perfect Dark
Developer: Rare

7 We aren't haters of Rare's Xbox 360 launch-day attempt to bring Joanna Dark into the next generation – but that doesn't exactly mean we are heralding it as the future of shooters either. We'd love to see her given another shot: there's room for a more considered shooter in today's market. One that utilises science-fiction gadgetry and espionage, alongside the massive explosions and big thrill shoot-outs we've all come to expect in a post-*Call Of Duty* world. Whether Rare returns to do it isn't a massive concern – we just want to see *Perfect Dark* become the system seller it was always destined to be and live up to the potential it promised us.

Star Fox
Developer: Nintendo

8 *Star Fox* has been lost in space for a very long time. But we are firm believers that somewhere between *Star Fox 64* and the waylaid *Star Fox* Adventures there is a serviceable franchise. We aren't totally opposed to the inclusion of on-foot adventure sections, though being able to switch between ground and aerial combat on the move would be a welcome addition. We'd also like to see new canon put in place: we can't see anyone mourning the loss of Slippy much, and it's time Fox McCloud finally got his due. Match him up with an awesome cast, raise the stakes to intergalactic threat levels and give us an adventure in the stars, in the sky and on the ground.

Streets Of Rage
Developer: Sega

9 To this very day, *Streets Of Rage* still stands as one of the very best beat-'em-up series available, and it's criminal the series hasn't been given the love it deserves. With the success of the Xbox Live Arcade and PlayStation Network, now is the perfect time to create a brand new take on the series. Redesign and repurpose the four characters, update the tired gameplay mechanics and introduce new retro-chic streets to punch, kick and roller-skate through. We're okay with *Streets Of Rage* staying 2D – we just want to see it get a new coat of paint, some fresh ideas and return to reinvigorate the beat-'em-up scene again like it first did in 1991.

Turok
Developer: Acclaim

10 How such a simple concept has been so misrepresented we will never understand. A time-travelling warrior ventures to The Lost Land and shoots dinosaurs to save the universe. Sounds great, but as the 2008 game proved, it's not so easy to execute well. *Turok* needs to return to its comic-book roots and embrace how ridiculous the concept is. Look at *Far Cry 3* as an example of what an open-world jungle can feel like, then imagine dinosaurs roaming around it instead of lions. It'll take a lot for a developer to take another stab at the series, but we are staying positive – because everything needs more dinosaurs in it.

Save up to 40% off regular print prices

1 Visit the website GreatDigitalMags.com



2 Filter titles by your favourite store

iTunes | Google play | amazon | zinio | MAGZTER | nook by Barnes & Noble

3 Choose a digital magazine or book

4 Purchase in-store, download & enjoy!



gamesTM

MMO WORLDS

The essential guide to the online gaming universe



Dota 2

THE BACKGROUND ON VALVE'S FREE-TO-PLAY ARENA MASTERPIECE

Ghengis Khan, as he rode his armies across Asia and Europe, acquired such a reputation for brutality that well-fortified, -supplied and -defended cities would surrender rather than suffer the possible horrors of being sacked. This is an old tactic among generals (Alexander the Great, Count Belisarius and Cromwell did the same) – make your name synonymous with death, so that your enemy would rather submit than risk your wrath.

Many MOBAs (the appalling acronym for these arena battle games) generate that level of fear among new entrants. The premise is seemingly simple: you control a single character in a team-based multiplayer battle, who you gradually level up as the game progresses, while seeking to destroy the enemy's base. Games like *League Of Legends* and *Dota 2* have quickly acquired a reputation of being intimidating, both in gameplay and their community. Despite this, their communities keep growing; perhaps, like *Eve*, this abusive hazing process gives the play a greater sense of reward than they'd otherwise feel – the sense of having learned.

INFORMATION

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **Valve**
DEVELOPER: **In-house**
ORIGIN: **US**

So, without a click of the mouse, *Dota 2* – Valve's salvo in the genre – is inevitably an intimidating prospect. The game has been in closed beta now for several months, but is actually pretty much released; if you want a key for the game, then you won't have to search far online to discover one. And, for an old strategy gamer, fundamentally *Dota 2* is no more challenging than *StarCraft II*. The higher level tricks of the gameplay will no doubt perplex – but the strategy game movement and perspective is neatly familiar. Simpler elements such as the emphasis on kitting out your hero and the way that the map is laid out are not too difficult. Yet the strange hero selection screen (where each team takes turns to pick and ban particular characters) and the huge variety of unique heroes make starting off difficult.

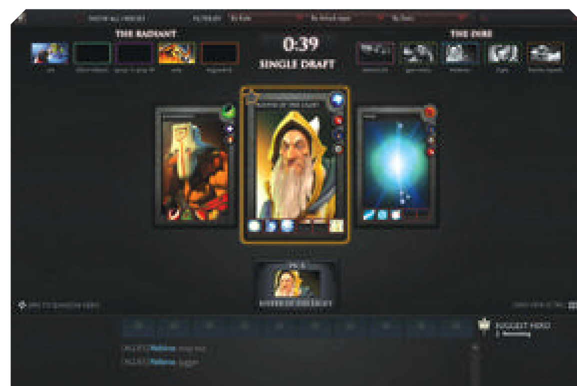


Once in the game, you quickly realise how strange this is. It's still a single-map game, which makes it ideal as an e-sport – what varies each game isn't the setting or the rules, but the five players on each side. Its quirks come from that niche development; players get the majority of their gold from finishing blows on other players, towers and troops, and have developed an entire vocabulary based on the limited features of this map – 'denies', 'feeder', 'gank', 'jungling', 'SS', 'Top' and so on.

ALSO KEY IS the Shop system. Like an RPG, each item provides a stats boost and/or a new ability. Higher level items are auto-crafted from multiple low-level items as you buy them. You need to be near a shop to actually pick up your items, meaning either a long trudge back or death – or the







Picking characters at the start is highly tactical. The drafting system allows players to ban the opposition from certain heroes, preventing so-called hard counters to some otherwise powerful characters.

"Screw up and you have up to four other players whose in-game reputations and enjoyment are being ruined by you and they won't be shy to tell you that"



The game has definitely eliminated all bugs - but not all...



use of a courier – a small, fast NPC that brings items to you, but can die easily so needs protecting. It's tough to know every character and every possible build like the hardcore players do, but get specialised in a few and you're ready to go.

What is obvious is that playing the game using the tropes of an RPG or even another MOBA will lead to your failure. The basic automated troops are extremely tough, easily capable of taking down a starting player, so you quickly learn to stay back. And, while dying when playing against bots or with friends is disappointing, failing on a public server calls down the opprobrium of your allies upon you. Essentially, here you have up to four other players whose in-game reputations and enjoyment are being ruined by you, and they're not shy in letting you know that.

A better way to learn is by watching. *Dota 2* is already an e-sport of note ahead of release, thanks to Valve's sponsorship of its International tournaments, and many of the biggest names in *StarCraft II* and *League Of Legends* have established teams. Thanks to integration with Steam's matchmaking service, anyone can spectate on anyone else's match and matches are automatically recorded. This means you can literally watch the masters at work, often with commentary from professional commentators, and hence learn fast.

We can't explicitly review *Dota 2* yet, since it's theoretically still in beta. But if you're thick-skinned, a fast thinker and willing to learn, it's more polished than almost any other game, so give it a go. Do well and perhaps next year you'll be the one sitting at the front of the International, clicking frantically, looking at that $1,000,000 grand prize, and working out how to make your name synonymous with victory.

THAT'S DOTA TOO?

DOTA WAS originally a mod for Blizzard's *Warcraft III*, made by a player called IceFrog under the name 'Defense of the Ancients' (the ancients being the Elven fortress-trees players had to defend). The mod attracted a huge number of players, gradually appearing in the World Cyber Games from 2005, eventually attracting as many as *CounterStrike*.

Since Valve's hiring of IceFrog and announcement of the sequel, there has been a three-way legal battle to establish ownership of the name. Riot Games, creator of *League of Legend* (very much a *DotA* clone), hired two players who'd further modded *DotA* into *DotA: Allstars* and legally opposed Valve's trademark. Blizzard itself, now part of Activision-Blizzard, also opposed it, on the basis it had been created using its *Warcraft III* World Editor. Blizzard eventually purchased the rights to *DotA: Allstars* from Riot in 2011 and started legal action against Valve's trademark.

In May 2012, the two firms came to an agreement, with Blizzard renaming its game to *Blizzard: Allstars*. So there are three *DotA* successors right now: *League Of Legends*, *Dota 2* and *Blizzard: Allstars*. And we're not even talking about *Heroes Of Newerth*, *Smite*, *Demigod* or *Bloodline: Champions*...

Star Citizen

CHRIS ROBERTS IS BACK AND HE'S BROUGHT THE SPACE SIM BACK WITH HIM


Just a small element from the carrier reveals quite how detailed the game is: not only a tiny ship on a tiny flight deck, but a tiny person trying to fix it.

When his *Star Wars* life ended and his career mainly consisted of sitting in conventions weeping as $50 bills were handed across in exchange for a second of his time and an autograph, Luke Skywalker actor Mark Hamill was rejuvenated by a role in a new space epic. *Wing Commander III*, created by the wonderful Origin Systems and Chris Roberts, brought Hamill back into a sort of limelight, except now in the videogames sector.

Yet after 11 games between 1990 and 1997, *Wing Commander* finally died in the late 1990s, during EA's infamous "kill all the great studios we bought" period, and the death of the space sim as a genre. After the great successes of *Privateer* and *Freelancer*, Chris Roberts left the industry in 2000 and moved into movies, producing titles including *The Punisher* and *Lord Of War*. He finally returned to games in 2011, rapidly raising over $6 million from crowdfunding for a brand new project.

Star Citizen is that project. It's a classic *Wing Commander*-style game, which means it involves players exploring a plot-rich universe full of giant capital ships, tiny fighters and a plethora of alien races. "Ever since I saw *Star Wars* as a wide-eyed eight year old, I've dreamt of being a hotshot pilot saving the galaxy…" says Roberts. "It's influenced everything I've done since then."

WATCHING A PILOT climb into an in-game cockpit shows off the care Roberts has put into the game. Every action a player takes is mirrored by the in-game pilot on his own HUD. If you look around, you can see him tapping pads, pulling on his joystick, turning his head to track targets. Outside the ship, you can see landing gear retract and the various thrusters firing on a fighter. The game is so detailed, if one of those myriad thrusters gets damaged then the entire mobility of the ship is affected.

However, the game is intriguingly split; Squadron 42 is a single-player game where you're in the military, with missions coming

INFORMATION

FORMAT: PC
PUBLISHER: Cloud Imperium Games
DEVELOPER: In-house/Behavior Interactive
ORIGIN: US




Even a mighty carrier is vulnerable to a sneak attack, as these pirate raiders are about to demonstrate.



ONLY ON PC

Roberts has stated in the past that he's only making *Star Citizen* for PC – it's where he knows where the audience is and he's an avowed PC gamer himself. Yet would the rumoured specifications of the next-gen consoles tempt him to change his mind? "It's not something we're really looking at right now. It's entirely possible that a future Xbox or PlayStation could technically run *Star Citizen*, but right now the proposed structure of our universe, our direct connection to the game's community and plans for frequent updates would be impossible under the closed systems that Microsoft and Sony run on their consoles. If Microsoft or Sony opened their platform up and allowed more freedom akin to the PC platform, and the next-gen hardware worked for *Star Citizen* then we would seriously consider expanding support, but only in a way that all players could play in the same universe."

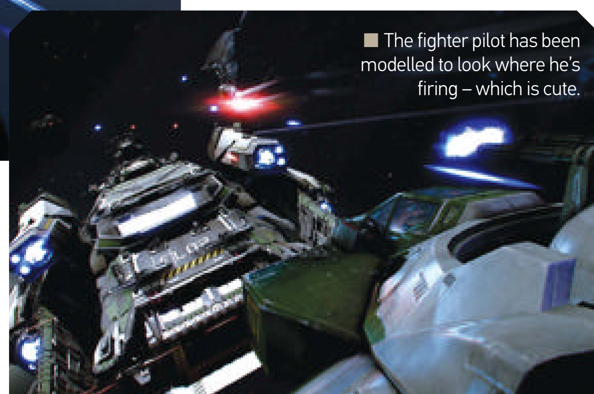


The game is planning to include real-world physics. In a gravity-free vacuum, that means it'll handle very differently from those space games based on flight sims.

down from on high, forming a branching campaign, just like *Wing Commander*, with drop-in, drop-out co-op from other players. The majority of the game demo shows this off, with fighters battling raiders near a kilometre-long carrier starship that's straight out of *Battlestar Galactica*.

Finish that tour of duty or choose to skip it, though, and you're in the open universe. If you've finished the game's plot, you may well be a 'citizen', a grade not available to everyone – but not desirable to everyone either. "Citizenship is not the end-all goal of the game," says Roberts. "A lot of players, for instance, are going to want to be pirates, smugglers… all sorts of character types who live outside the law. And for them, citizenship will be a burden or just an outright impossibility."

The universe is huge, with 100 unique systems at launch, more than *Privateer* or *Freelancer*. "We're not at a point where I can estimate how long it will take to cross that" says Roberts. "Jump paths still need to be mapped, planets and locations constructed – but you will have plenty to explore!" The universe itself isn't static, though: explore an anomaly, for example, to open up a new area of space, and that new jump point will be named after you.



The fighter pilot has been modelled to look where he's firing – which is cute.

"The proposed structure of our universe, our direct connection to the game's community and plans for frequent updates would be impossible under the closed systems that Microsoft and Sony run on their consoles"



ON TOP OF that, the team will be adding new content, such as star systems, every fortnight. And that'll continue the story of the universe, which like the citizenship models itself after the Roman Empire (which Roberts admits he would have loved to be a citizen of). "We're modelled after the later days of Rome and we'll be taking a lot of those excesses and social failings across to our world. And how the players react to all that will guide how our world evolves. Different races will have distinct cultures and systems all their own."

Again, that universe you play in might be one hosted by Roberts's team or it might be on a private server. "The persistent universe that we host will be more dynamic and allow a lot more players than someone can have on a private server as we have an architecture that has multiple servers handling the universe, planets and sections of space that will be distributed around the globe on cloud servers, which isn't practical for an individual to host," Roberts explains. "Having said that, the idea is to give players complete control over their experience if they so wish. Modding your private server to allow you to play with a select group of your friends in your own custom universe is encouraged and even supported."

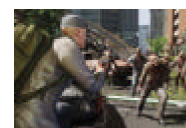
Although Roberts has talked much about the game, all we've seen so far has been a high-energy trailer showing off the graphics, action and several of the in-game ships and their interiors. Crucially, though, it was definitely all in-engine (noticeable from the slight asset pop-up visible in the trailer), which means that this is how the game will actually look – and will be the number-one reason to upgrade your PC, this year or next.



MMO UPDATES

THE LATEST DEVELOPMENTS IN THE WORLD OF ONLINE GAMING

THE WAR ZZZZZ



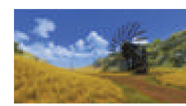
It was bad enough that zombie sandbox *War Z* was attempting to copy the superb *ARMA 3* mod *DayZ*. But when it emerged that the developers had exaggerated about many of the game's features, hadn't implemented others, and started banning players who complained, Valve pulled the game from Steam. And now it's been hit by hackers! Somedays there's just no reason for getting out bed.

TERA HEADING TO F2P



Fewer and fewer games are launching with subscription models these days; even fewer are lasting a full 12 months before abandoning them for free-to-play. Anyway, *Tera*, which launched in Europe early last year, has just gone free-to-play in its home country of South Korea. GameForge, which runs the European version, might well be planning an announcement soon, so we'd hold off buying the game for now.

ARCHEAGE REVEALED



Korean MMOs are normally an appalling mix of one or two amazing ideas and the usual slew of generic grind. Like *Age Of Wushu*, the CryEngine 2-powered *Archeage* is planning to change that. *Archeage*'s interesting twist is a full crime system – complete with trials, jail time and outlaws. *Archeage* creator Jake Song confirmed on Twitter that "We're working on the English version", but the beta is still a way off.

THE REPOPULATION



Following the likes of *Shadowbane*, *Wurm* and *Eve*, *The Repopulation* is attempting a sandbox MMO. In a sci-fi universe, players can build their own cities, create sociopolitical structures in them, besiege other cities, and create their own factions. Inside the latter there's room for purely non-combat skills – like crafting, harvesting and even diplomacy.

The most pertinent questions facing MMO developers today



James McCauley,

Executive producer, Firefall

One of the most enticing MMOs on the horizon, Red 5 Studios' *Firefall* has quickly become the talk of the online community. **games™** chats to executive producer James McCauley about the innovative cross-genre MMO shooter

With the vibrant art style and 'battleframe' structure, are you welcoming comparisons to Gearbox's *Borderlands*?
I don't mind comparisons… but I do see them as two pretty different games. I think the two biggest reasons we are most often compared to *Borderlands* is the overlap in our art style and the fact that we are a class-based shooter in a non-linear world.

Is there a growing desire for more traditional gaming experiences within the MMO genre?
I think players are ready for something new… For *Firefall*, we set out to build the next generation of online shooters. We started with making sure it felt great to wield and fire a gun. We then built out from there, making sure movement and AI combat offered a compelling experience… We then reached a point where we were able to bring in features from other genres that we felt had an important role in the future of online shooters. These included some of the more traditional MMO-type features such as squads, armies, friends, chat, character progression, equipment customisation and a massive shared open world.

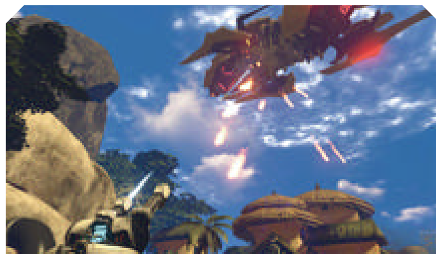
It's all about jetpacks in *Firefall*. Were they always intended to be such a defining feature of the game?
Jetpacks became one of our game-defining features the day Scott Youngblood, our lead designer, joined the team. [As the lead designer on the old-school *Tribes* series] he sank his teeth into the juiciness of high-action, jetpacking, first-person combat and there was no way he would allow *Firefall* to launch without it. I recall Scott coming to me on his first day in the office saying, "James, where are the jetpacks?"

What sort of changes is *Firefall* undergoing?
One of the biggest changes currently being worked on is the introduction of stock battleframe loadouts for competitive play… Players in PvP will enter into battle with predefined sets of equipment. The desire is to make PvP more competitive by having stock gear with known sets of weapons and abilities. This should allow us to then offer greater latitude to what players can craft in the open world without creating a vertical power curve for PvP. This will allow new players to jump straight into PvP without being under-geared or at a great disadvantage.

You've said in the past that the game's enemies, the Chosen, can actually take over the world, kicking players off the server. Was this implemented due to the lack of stakes in other MMOs?
We have always been pretty big fans of giving players opportunities to make their mark on the world. We wanted to make your efforts matter on a large scale. And what better way to make a player's efforts matter than to have a very real threat always on the horizon that the player can keep at bay? We are upping the ante for players by making them realise that, hey, you can lose the war. The war with the Chosen isn't some perpetuating background scenery just to set the mood – it's an actual war. The Chosen will attack various objectives and outposts, which, if ignored, will have serious consequences. It also helps us to ensure that our world constantly remains feeling fresh and alive, no matter what else is going on. You have this ever-present threat, and if you don't do your part to keep it at bay, it will overrun you.

> "For Firefall, we set out to build the next generation of online shooters"

For more *Firefall* info, visit www.firefallthegame.com





We want *Firefall* to be a skill-based shooter," McCauley says. "[We] do not want to dilute this focus by selling 'I win!' buttons."

games™

Imagine Publishing Ltd
Richmond House, 33 Richmond Hill,
Bournemouth, Dorset, BH2 6EZ
☎ +44 (0) 1202 586200
Web: www.imagine-publishing.co.uk
www.gamestm.co.uk
www.greatdigitalmags.com

Magazine team
Editor In Chief Nick Roberts
nick.roberts@imagine-publishing.co.uk
☎ 01202 586219
Staff Writer David Scarborough
Staff Writer Josh West
Senior Art Editor Greg Whitaker
Assistant Designer Perry Wardell-Wicks
Photographer James Sheppard
Head of Publishing Aaron Asadi
Head of Design Ross Andrews

Contributors
Luke Albigés, Ben Biggs, Adam Barnes, Ross Board, Daniel Cairns, Martyn Carroll, Jon Denton, Ian Dransfield, Dan Griliopoulos, Stace Harman, Stuart Hunt, Darran Jones, Phil King, Ryan King, David Lynch, Graeme Mason, James Mielke, Damian McFerran, Chris Schilling

Advertising
Digital or printed media packs are available on request.
Head of Sales Hang Deretz
☎ 01202 586442
hang.deretz@imagine-publishing.co.uk
Ad Manager Simon Catley
☎ 01202 586437
simon.cately@imagine-publishing.co.uk
Account Manager Anthony Godsell
☎ 01202 586420
anthony.godsell@imagine-publishing.co.uk
Sales Executive Richard Rust
☎ 01202 586436
richard.rust@imagine-publishing.co.uk

International
games™ is available for licensing. Contact the International department to discuss partnership opportunities.
Head of International Licensing Cathy Blackman
☎ +44 (0) 1202 586401
licensing@imagine-publishing.co.uk

Subscriptions
For subscription enquiries email:
gamestm@servicehelpline.co.uk
Head of Subscriptions Lucy Nash
subscriptions@imagine-publishing.co.uk
☎ UK 0844 848 8429
☎ Overseas +44 1795 592 864
13 issue subscription UK – £52.00
13 issue subscription Europe – £70.00
13 issue subscription ROW – £80.00

Circulation
Head of Circulation Darren Pearce
☎ 01202 586200

Production
Production Director Jane Hawkins
☎ 01202 586200

Founders
Group Managing Director Damian Butt
Group Finance & Commerical Director Steven Boyd
Group Creative Director Mark Kendrick

Printing & Distribution
Printed by Wyndeham Heron Ltd, Bentalls Complex, Colchester Road, Heybridge, Maldon, Essex, CM9 4NW
☎ 01621 877 777
Distributed in the UK and Eire by Seymour Distribution, 2 East Poultry Avenue, London, EC1A 9PT
☎ 020 7429 4000
Distributed in Australia by Gordon & Gotch, Equinox Centre, 18 Rodborough Road, Frenchs Forest, NSW 2086
☎ +61 2 9972 8800
Distributed in the Rest of the World by Marketforce, Blue Fin Building, 110 Southwark Street, London, SE1 0SU
☎ 020 3148 8105

ISSN 1478-5889



IMAGINE PUBLISHING







15,066
1 Jan - 31 Dec 2011


HOME, SWEET HOME.
MAKE ANOTHER TRIP
OUT FOR GAMES™ 133
ON SALE 14 MARCH.